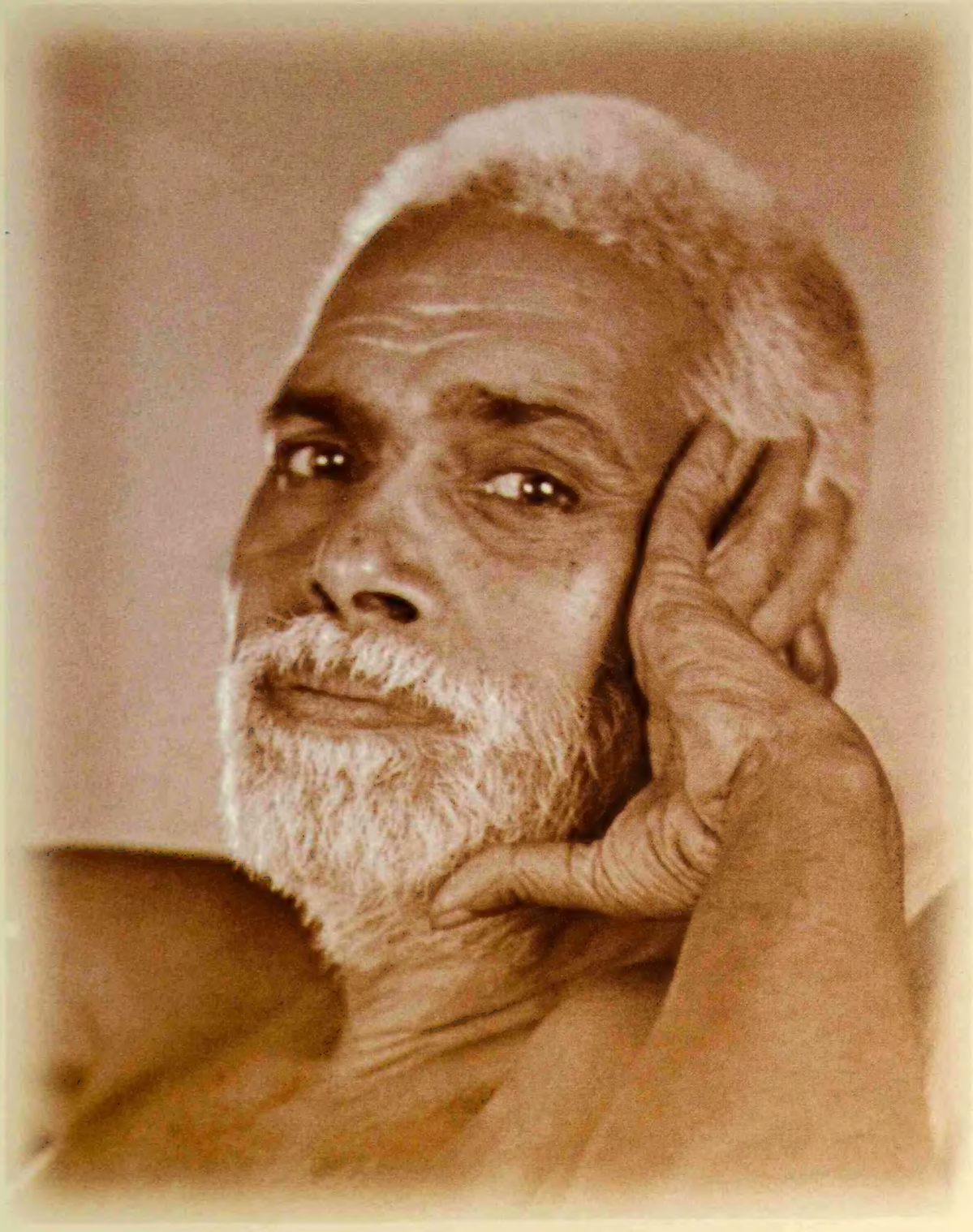
The POWER *of the* PRESENCE



DAVID GODMAN

Part Two

The Power Of The Presence

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Teachings of *Sri Ramana Maharshi*
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The Power Of The Presence

Transforming Encounters With
Sri Ramana Maharshi

Part Two

Edited by
David Godman

By the same author

Be As You Are
No Mind – I am The Self
Papaji Interviews
Living By The Words Of Bhagavan
Nothing Ever Happened (three volumes)
Annamalai Swami: Final Talks
The Power of the Presence, Part One

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Back cover photo by Dev Gogoi:
Arunachala reflected in Pali Tirtham.

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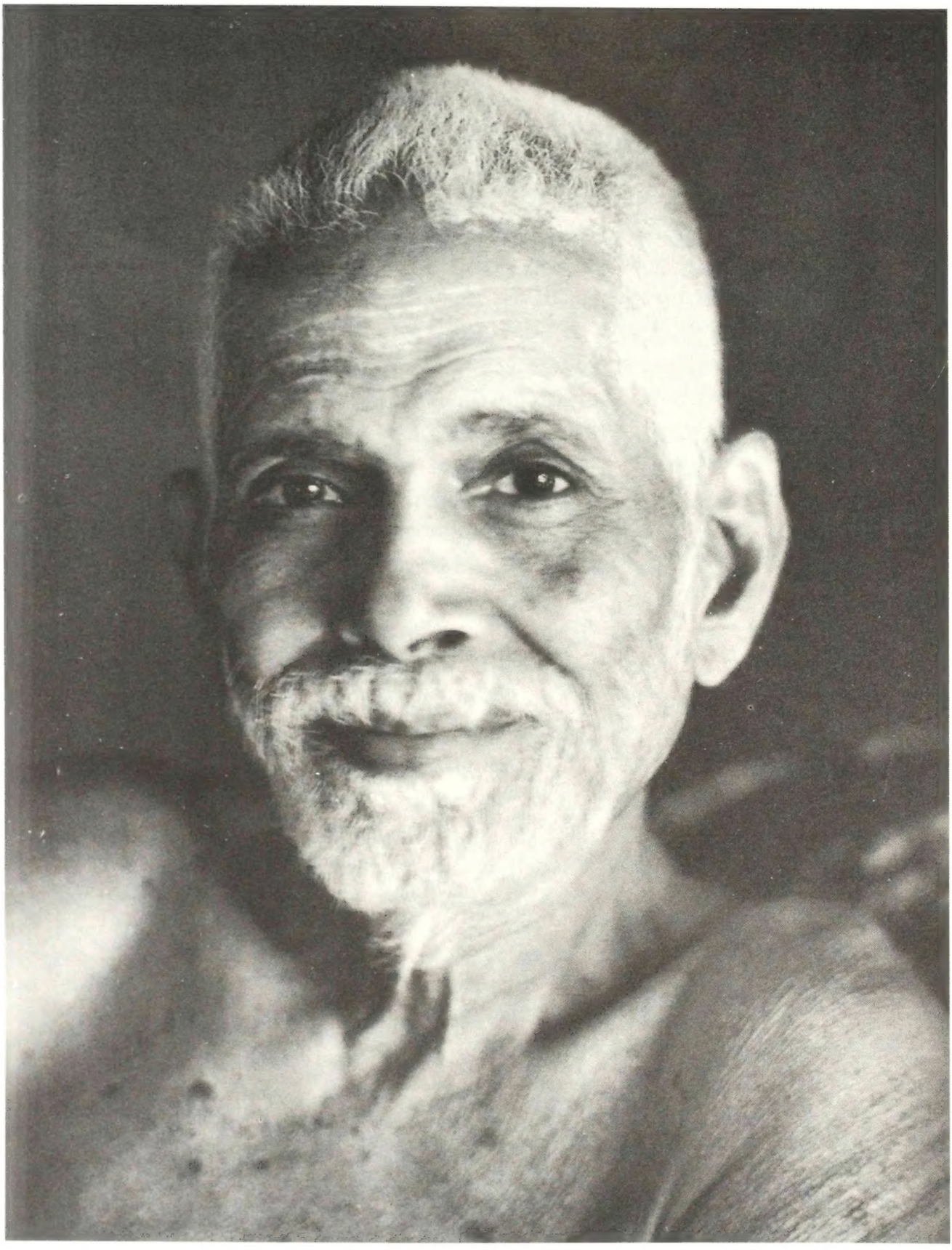

Sri Ramana Maharshi

Preface

I outlined the genesis and structure of *The Power of the Presence* in some detail when I wrote the Preface to Part One, so I will not repeat information that has already been given there. When I began to assemble the material that was eventually included in that work, my primary intention was to make available to English-speaking readers stories by devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi that had only previously been available in various Indian languages. However, there is a vast amount of material on Sri Ramana that has appeared in English over the past few decades that is equally unknown to many foreign devotees simply because it has appeared in obscure journals or books that are rarely distributed outside India. In making my selection for this second volume I have tapped into these sources and supplemented them with new translations of classic stories about Sri Ramana.

I have followed the format of the previous volume. Those devotees whose relationship with Bhagavan dates from the early decades of his stay at Arunachala have their stories near the beginning of the book, and vice versa. The one exception, Viswanatha Swami, has a moving account of Bhagavan's passing away in 1950, so I decided his story would make a fitting final chapter.

I have recently begun work on a third volume that I hope will be available before the end of this year.

DAVID GODMAN,
Tiruvannamalai, April, 2001

Kunju Swami

Kunju Swami's association with Bhagavan goes back to the days when the latter still lived on the hill, at Skandashram. He served as one of Bhagavan's attendants from 1920 till around 1932 when, with Bhagavan's permission, he resigned from his position so that he could spend more time meditating. From then on he lived in Palakottu, a small colony of sadhus *located immediately to the west of the ashram. During the years that followed he regularly came to Bhagavan's hall to have his* darshan *and to listen to him expounding his teachings. He also took on the role of a roving ambassador, for he was frequently selected to represent the ashram at various functions and ceremonies that were held at other ashrams and* maths.

In 1977 he wrote an account in Tamil of his life with Bhagavan. In the first chapter he described his childhood in Kerala, his early interest in the spiritual life, and his association with Elapulli Kuppandi Swami, a local guru who taught him Vedanta *and told him about the existence of a great sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi, whom he had visited at Tiruvannamalai. Kunju Swami was anxious to have Bhagavan's* darshan *himself, so when Kuppandi Swami released him from his service, after first encouraging him to keep up his scriptural studies and his meditation, he returned home in January 1920 with the intention of finding a way to reach Tiruvannamalai.*

When I returned home my parents were delighted to see me. I stayed with them for a couple of days but my mind was not there. It was already at Tiruvannamalai.

While I was absorbed in thinking how I could get some money to go there, my father called me and asked, 'Do you owe money for the food and accommodation you received during your stay with Kuppandi Swami?'

When I told him that I did, he gave me five rupees and asked me to give it the next day. This gave me the means to go to Tiruvannamalai. I did not really owe any money, but I consoled myself by thinking that there was no harm in telling a small lie in order to achieve such a great ideal.

The next day, at 3 a.m., I left home without telling anyone and with a great eagerness to have Sri Bhagavan's *darshan.* Assuming that I would never be returning to that house again, I prostrated both to the house and to my sleeping parents before I left the village. I was afraid that people whom I knew might recognise me at the nearby Palghat railway station, so I went further down the line to Kanjikkode. I arrived there early in the morning, but when I enquired about trains to Tiruvannamalai I was told that the first one was not due till that evening. I spent an anxious day, hoping that no one would spot me there.

As I sat in the station my mind was dwelling so intensely on my desire to see Sri Bhagavan, hunger and thirst were forgotten. A little before 6 p.m., the time the train was due to arrive, I asked for a ticket to Tiruvannamalai but was told that tickets were not being issued to that town. No reason was given. So, instead, they issued a ticket to Katpadi, a big railway junction about fifty miles north of Tiruvannamalai. I dimly remember getting into the compartment but since Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* was the sole thought occupying my mind, I was not aware of the passing of the night or of anything else.

The train reached Katpadi at 4 a.m. the next morning. I made some enquiries and found that the next train to Tiruvannamalai was due to leave in two and a half hours, at 6.30. However, when I went to the counter at 6 o'clock and asked for a ticket to Tiruvannamalai, I was told that the train had come early and had left at 5.30. This news disoriented me for some time. At first I did not know what to do with myself because the next train was not due to leave for Tiruvannamalai before six that evening.

When I had recovered from my disappointment I became aware that I had not eaten anything since the morning of the previous day. I bought some *elandi* fruit for half an *anna* and passed the time by alternately eating a little of the fruit and drinking tap water from the station tap. At 5.30 I went back to the ticket office and tried to buy a ticket for Tiruvannamalai. For the second time on this journey I was told that tickets were not being issued for Tiruvannamalai. I was quite bewildered because, yet again, no reason was given. While I was standing there, wondering what to do, an elderly gentleman called out to me.

We chatted briefly and when he learned what my intended

destination was he told me, 'There has been an outbreak of bubonic plague in Tiruvannamalai.[1] The situation there has improved a little recently, but you still cannot buy a ticket to there. It has been quarantined. However, if you buy a ticket to Tirukoilur [a station further down the line] and board the train, when the train stops at Tiruvannamalai to deliver the mail, you can get down in the dark without anyone seeing you'.

I felt very relieved when I found out that it would still be possible to continue with my journey. I asked for a ticket to Tirukoilur and handed over all my money. The ticket clerk counted it and told me that a ticket would cost a quarter of an *anna* more than the amount I had. Extremely disappointed by this new blow, I wandered out of the booking office and stood on the edge of the platform. There I thought of Sri Bhagavan and felt very sad that my attempt to see him had apparently been frustrated.

A few minutes before the arrival of the train I noticed, some distance from where I was standing, a glittering quarter rupee coin between the two rails. I ran, jumped down, took it and managed to purchase a ticket just as the train was entering the station. Marvelling at the compassion shown to me by Sri Bhagavan, I got into the compartment and sat down.

At about 9 p.m. that evening the train entered Tiruvannamalai station. There were no lights visible, but from the conversations of the passengers I realised that I had arrived at my destination. I watched to see if anyone else was getting down. When I saw that a person who had been sitting opposite me was disembarking in the dark, I too got down and followed him. It was Sri Bhagavan's will that I had missed the morning train in Katpadi. Had I come by that train, it would have been impossible

[1] There were many outbreaks of bubonic plague all across Asia between 1890 and the late 1920s. Since this was the pre-antibiotic era, there was a high mortality rate among the victims. In an attempt to reduce the incidence of the disease, the British government evacuated areas where the disease was rampant in the hope that it would naturally die out in those places. During the 1920 outbreak in Tiruvannamalai Bhagavan remained in Skandashram, but during an earlier outbreak in 1908 he was compelled to move outside the town limits. On that occasion he took up residence in Pachaiamman Koil, a temple on the north-east side of the hill.

for me to get off at Tiruvannamalai during the day because someone would have seen me.

I followed my fellow passenger without knowing where he was going. He walked for some time, stopped at a *mantapam*, dusted the floor with his shawl and then lay down and went to sleep. The tedious journey of two days without any proper food had also made me very tired. I joined the other man on the floor and immediately went to sleep, tired but very happy.

At 5 a.m. the next morning I woke up. I could not find the person who had guided me to the *mantapam* but I could see the mountain of Arunachala standing before me. Before I had left home Ramakrishna Swami [a friend of his from his home village in Kerala] had given me directions on how to find Sri Bhagavan. He had told me that if I climbed the steps that began near the back of the big temple, I would reach Sri Bhagavan's ashram.

When I reached the foot of the hill I discovered that there were three different sets of steps leading up the hill. I could not decide which one to take, but eventually I chose, at random, the one on my right and started walking along it. I climbed a short distance up the hill and encountered an ochre-robed person standing outside a building. His matted locks were so long, they were rolling on the ground. I found out later that this was a *sadhu* called Jada Swami. I had already seen Sri Bhagavan's photo, so I knew that this person could not be Sri Bhagavan. At that time I believed that *sadhus* with matted locks would pronounce deadly curses when they got angry. As this belief surfaced in my mind, I suddenly became afraid of this *sadhu*, so afraid I turned around and ran quickly down the hill without looking back. At the bottom of the hill I decided to try again by climbing the middle route. This time I was more successful. A few minutes after I began I saw, some distance away, two people standing on the bank of a small tank. I called out to them and asked for directions to Sri Bhagavan's ashram. Fortunately for me they turned out to be two of Sri Bhagavan's devotees.

Noticing my tired face and my Tamil mixed with Malayalam, they said, very sympathetically, 'You look very tired. Have a bath in this tank. Afterwards, if you climb by this route you will reach Skandashram. If you go and stay there, we will fetch some food so that you can eat.'

I followed their advice, had a bath in the tank and got rid of my outer dirt. Then, like a calf seeking its mother, I hastened to Skandashram to get rid of my inner impurities. As I approached Sri Bhagavan for the first time, my mind was in a state of great ecstasy.

I had thought a lot about how I should prostrate and how I should conduct myself before Sri Bhagavan. I finally decided to take as *upadesa* [spiritual instruction from the Guru] whatever Sri Bhagavan uttered to me first. I reached Skandashram and felt a physical thrill when I saw Sri Bhagavan for the first time. At the moment of my arrival three devotees – my friend Ramakrishna Swami, Perumal Swami and Akhandananda – were prostrating to Sri Bhagavan, so I too prostrated. Ramakrishna Swami was both surprised and delighted to see me.

He told Sri Bhagavan, 'He has come from my village. He has been a *sadhu* ever since he was a young boy. He is the one who sent me here.'

Sri Bhagavan nodded his head as if he were somehow giving his approval.

Ramakrishna Swami then said to me, 'You stay here for some time. We are going down the hill but we will be back soon.'

I learned later that a devotee called Annamalai Swami, who had been Sri Bhagavan's attendant, had died of plague on that day and that the three devotees I had seen prostrating were going off to bury him.

As they were leaving I heard someone sobbing in an adjoining room. I looked inside and saw an elderly woman lamenting, unable to bear her grief.

She called out, 'How unjust! This Annamalai, who was a gem of a man, has passed away!' A man was sitting by her side.

Turning towards them and pointing to me, Sri Bhagavan consoled them both by saying, 'Why are you grieving unnecessarily? To replace that first son another son has just arrived.'

At the time I could not make out the meaning of those golden words. Only later was I able to understand their true meaning. I soon learnt that the elderly woman sitting inside was Sri Bhagavan's mother and that the person with her was Sri Bhagavan's brother.

Later that morning, at about 8 a.m., a devotee, Ramalingam Pillai, who was staying at Skandashram and was also known as

Turiyananda, gave me an earthen bowl, took one for himself, and sat with me under a tree to eat. Sri Bhagavan also sat on a nearby platform with a bowl. Venu Ammal, Echammal's sister, who was giving food to Sri Bhagavan that day, had sent us *rasam* and rice to eat.

At the end of the meal everyone left except Sri Bhagavan and me. Sri Bhagavan, who had not spoken to me till then, took some flour from a small tin, put it in a pot, poured some water from his *kamandalu* [a water pot made from a coconut shell] over it, mixed it with a spoon and then heated the mixture on the charcoal stove that was kept there to heat the rooms. Thinking that Sri Bhagavan was preparing some *kaya kalpa* [magical concoction], I sat quietly, hoping to get some myself. After the contents had turned into a paste, Sri Bhagavan took the vessel off the stove and poured a portion of it onto a plate. Then he got up and lifted an upturned basket. Four puppies rushed out and raced towards the gruel on the plate. Thinking that it might be too hot for them, Sri Bhagavan tried to ward them off but was unable to do so.

Sri Bhagavan, who had not spoken to me till then, called out to me, 'Catch hold of the four!'

I immediately caught hold of them.

Then, after the gruel had cooled down a little, Sri Bhagavan said, 'Let them go one by one'.

As I had resolved to take Sri Bhagavan's first words to me as *upadesa*, I took the first command to mean 'Catch hold of the four *mahavakyas*'.

Releasing the pups one by one I took the second command to mean, 'Give up desires and attachments one by one'.

The puppies had their fill and wandered off to play. A few minutes later one of them urinated. Sri Bhagavan got up immediately, poured some water from his *kamandalu* and cleaned up the mess with an old gunny bag. I felt a strong urge to do this work myself, but since I felt that it was not proper on my part to do so without being asked, I just sat quietly, feeling slightly apprehensive. As Sri Bhagavan came back to sit down, another puppy urinated. Sri Bhagavan saw that I was getting restless and asked me to clean up the mess by saying the single word, 'Wipe'. I got up and cleaned the spot with water.

'Wipe the mind and keep it clean.'

I felt that this was my third *upadesa*. Having got the *upadesa*

I had desired, I felt extremely happy and tranquil.

I thought that this was an opportune moment to speak to Sri Bhagavan because he was sitting quietly and we were alone together. I told him in Malayalam all about my boyhood, how I had been doing *japa* and giving spiritual discourses. I told him that I had taken lessons in Vedanta because my father had wished me to do so, and I also told him about my experiences with Elapulli Kuppandi Swami, the man who had taught me Vedanta. I explained that I had lived for a long time in a state of confusion, without getting any spiritual experiences. Then, I said, I had gained great peace of mind merely by hearing about Sri Bhagavan.

Sri Bhagavan listened to everything with a smile. I concluded by asking him what I should do to get over my confusion and gain clarity.

He replied, 'You have studied *Kaivalyam*. One of the verses says, "If he [the disciple] comes to see the individual self and its substratum, ... then he becomes the substratum, *Brahman*, and escapes rebirths. Should you know yourself, no harm will befall you. As you have asked, I have told you this."'

I then asked him how I could know myself and he replied, 'First know who you are'.

'How can I know who I am?' I asked.

'See from where thoughts arise,' answered Sri Bhagavan.

'But how is this to be done?' I enquired.

Sri Bhagavan first replied, 'Turn your mind inwards and see in the Heart,' and then afterwards reverted to his natural state of silence.

As we sat silently together, Sri Bhagavan's gracious look was fixed on me. At that very moment all my confusion ceased and I experienced a peace and bliss I had never experienced before.

Annamalai Swami, the attendant who had been buried on the day I arrived, had composed 100 songs on Sri Bhagavan. In the years following his death his brother and some other devotees used to perform *aradhana* [an anniversary *puja*] at his *samadhi* on the date of his death. They would sing the 100 songs in Sri Bhagavan's presence and would then join in the special *bhiksha* that was always arranged on that day. The anniversary was commemorated in this way for many years. I always regarded the day I had Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* for the

first time as my second birthday. Because this *darshan* took place on the day that Annamalai Swami attained *samadhi,* I used to think that the special *bhiksha* arranged every year on that day was also a feast to celebrate this second birth.

Annamalai Swami was not the only devotee to get bubonic plague. On the day I arrived another devotee, Ramanatha Brahmachari, was in great pain because his plague boil had just burst. I learned later that about a week before my arrival, when the disease had just begun to affect him, Sri Bhagavan had asked Ramanatha Brahmachari to stay at Skandashram while he went round the hill with Perumal Swami, Rangaswami Iyengar and a few others. On the way, while they were resting for a short while at Pachaiamman Temple, Perumal Swami and Iyengar Swami informed Sri Bhagavan of a plan they had thought of earlier.

'Since Ramanatha Brahmachari is afflicted with a contagious disease,' they said, 'we should all stay here at Pachaiamman Temple. We can take him food and look after him from here.'

Sri Bhagavan, who was compassion incarnate, was upset by their meanness.

'What a wonderful suggestion! He came to me while he was still a young boy. He is totally dependent on us. Is it proper for us to leave him alone in this condition and come to stay here? If you are afraid, you can all stay here. I will go and stay with him. When you bring food for him, you can bring me some as well.'

When the devotees heard this they remained silent, fearing to pursue the matter any more.

Because the plague had driven away most of the inhabitants of the town, visitors to Sri Bhagavan were very few. I was therefore left alone with Sri Bhagavan for much of the time. While we were together he often used to look at me, and as he did so, I became aware that his eyes had a strange brilliance and fascination in them. Whenever I looked into his eyes for any length of time I saw a bright effulgence. I could not say from where it came but it had the effect of making me forget everything. It was not like sleep for I was fully aware. I was also filled with a strange peace and bliss. After each experience I would come back to my normal physical state with a shudder. This occurred again and again on each of the eighteen days that I stayed with Sri Bhagavan. I was like someone intoxicated.

I was absolutely indifferent to everything, had no curiosity to see anything, no desires whatsoever. Whatever activities I did, I did them all in a very mechanical way.

So long as I stayed in the presence of Sri Bhagavan, I continued to have these experiences of peace and bliss. Because of the greatness of the presence of Sri Bhagavan I was able to experience the tranquil state of abiding firmly in the Heart.

After experiencing this state for some days the thought occurred to me, 'Here, in order to join in all the daily routines, I have to interrupt my meditative state. Now that I have this firm experience I could remain uninterruptedly in continuous meditation for days if I stayed at home.'

Furthermore, I felt that it was a sin to eat food from the Guru without doing any service to him in return. When I conveyed my thoughts to Ramakrishna Swami, I found that he was in complete agreement with me. We informed Sri Bhagavan of our decision and went back to our homes in Kerala. We had decided in advance that when we reached home we would meditate in seclusion, observe silence and be immersed in *samadhi*. We also decided neither to speak to anyone nor to meet each other.

When I reached home I found that my parents, who had been in a very agitated state because they had no idea where I had gone, were extremely happy to see me. Ramakrishna and I stuck to our resolution by staying in our respective homes and observing silence. My parents did not mind the silence, or anything else that I did. They were quite content merely to have me at home.

As the days passed, the meditative state experienced in Sri Bhagavan's presence steadily declined. I slowly became my old restless self. I did not have any new experiences, nor could I get into *samadhi*. Only then did I realise how ignorant I had been. I was greatly shaken by this disappointment, but I could not reveal to anyone what had happened. Then, one night, while I was dwelling on my disappointment, Ramakrishna Swami came to my place and revealed that his experience had been the same as mine. We both felt ashamed of our foolishness that led us to believe that we had achieved in a few days the state that aspirants of ancient days attained only after many years of striving in the immediate presence of great sages. By losing the state we had formerly experienced, we also realised fully the

greatness of Sri Bhagavan's presence. Feeling that it would be pointless for us to stay any longer at home, we decided that our only hope was to take refuge in Sri Bhagavan at Tiruvannamalai. After fixing a date for our departure, Ramakrishna Swami left for his house. My parents were shocked when I informed them of my decision, for it was contrary to all their expectations. They made a strenuous effort to keep me at home, but they were unable to make me change my mind.

I pacified them a little by saying, 'The fact that one of your four sons is following a *sadhu's* path will bring only honour and merit to you and not any loss.'

I added, 'I am not leaving without informing you as I did earlier. This time I would like to go with your consent and blessings. At Tiruvannamalai I am going to be living in the presence of Sri Bhagavan. You will know where I am and you can come and see me any time you like.'

After I had consoled them for some time in this way, they gave me their permission to leave.

Ramakrishna Swami and I reached Tiruvannamalai in two days. On seeing us, Sri Bhagavan looked at us as though he was joyfully welcoming us. We too felt very happy. When I had come to Sri Bhagavan for the first time, I had felt uneasy, thinking that it was a sin to eat at the Guru's place without performing any service in return. On my second visit Sri Bhagavan ensured that I did not have any such feelings by accepting me totally and by blessing me with the opportunity to serve him. Perumal Swami, who used to get hot water ready for Sri Bhagavan's bath, wash his clothes, rub oil on his feet before he retired to bed at night, and perform other personal services to him had decided to leave for a few days. Before he left he selected me and asked me to perform these same services. As I had been involved in spiritual matters from an early age, he was confident that I would carry out these tasks without committing any mistakes. Had I come two days later, I would have lost this great fortune. I then realised the significance of what Sri Bhagavan had said when I had visited him for the first time. He had pointed me out to his mother, who was lamenting over the death of Annamalai Swami, and said that I had come in his place.

When Sri Bhagavan accepted my services I felt overcome by his solicitude and graciousness. I cannot forget the wonderful

experience of being drawn to Tiruvannamalai by Sri Bhagavan. By 1977 [when this account was written], I had completed fifty-seven years of residence in Tiruvannamalai, but the memory of the joy experienced on my arrival still fills me and thrills me whenever I remember it.

Ramakrishna Swami was given the responsibility of attending to outside affairs, so we were both able to serve Sri Bhagavan and his ashram. He also attended on Sri Bhagavan whenever I was not around.

One day, while I was doing some work for Sri Bhagavan, I asked him why the experiences I had felt in his presence during my first visit had not continued after my return to Kerala but instead had steadily declined and finally ceased. By way of a reply Sri Bhagavan asked me to read verses eighty-three to ninety-three of the first section of *Kaivalya Navaneeta*, telling me that the answer to my question could be found in those verses. The verses are as follows:

83 On hearing this [instruction from the Master] the disciple, loyal to the instructions of the Master, discarded the five sheaths and the blank [mind], realised the Self as 'I am *Brahman*', went beyond that and remained as perfect being.

84 At the glance of the Master, who was grace incarnate, the worthy disciple sank into the ocean of bliss and merged as the undivided whole, as pure consciousness, free from the body, the organs and all else, with mind made perfect so that he became the true Self, unaware while awake.

85 After the blessed disciple had remained in that state for a long time, his mind gently turned outwards. Then he saw his glorious Master before him. His eyes were filled with tears of joy. He was full of love and fell at the feet of the Master. He rose up, went round the Master with folded hands and spoke to him:

86 'Lord, you are the reality remaining as my innermost Self, ruling me during all my countless incarnations! Glory to you who have put on an external form in order to instruct me! I do not see

how I can repay your grace for having liberated me. Glory! Glory to your holy feet!'

87 The Master beamed on him as he spoke, drew him near and said very lovingly, 'To stay fixed in the Self, without the three kinds of obstacles obstructing your experience, is the highest return you can render me'.

88 'My Lord! Can such realisation as has transcended the dual perception of "You" and "I", and found the Self to be entire and all pervading, fail me at any time?'

The Master replied, 'The truth that "I am *Brahman*" is realised from the scriptures or by the grace of the Master, but it cannot be firm in the face of obstruction.

89 'Ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge are obstacles resulting from long-standing habits in the innumerable incarnations of the past which cause trouble [and make] the fruits of realisation slip away. Therefore root them out by hearing the truth, reasoning and meditation [*sravana, manana, nididhyasana*].

90 'Defective realisation will not put an end to bondage. Therefore devote yourself to hearing the truth, reasoning and meditation and root out ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge.

91 'Ignorance veils the truth that the Self is *Brahman* and shows forth multiplicity instead. Uncertainty is the confusion resulting from lack of firm faith in the words of the Master. The illusion that the evanescent world is a reality and that the body is the self is wrong knowledge. So say the sages.

92 'Hearing the truth is to revert the mind repeatedly to the teaching: "That thou art". Reasoning is rational investigation of the meaning of the text, as already heard. Meditation is one-pointedness of mind.

93 'If every day you do these, you will surely gain liberation. The practice must be kept up so long as the sense of knower and knowledge persists. No effort is necessary thereafter. Remaining as pure, eternal consciousness, untainted like the ether and thus liberated while alive, one will live forever as That, after being disembodied also.'

Sri Bhagavan then summarised the verses and explained their meaning to me.

During the course of his explanation he remarked, 'The experience [of the Self] can occur in the presence of the Guru, but it may not last. Doubts will rise again and again and in order to clear them, the disciple should continue to study, think and practise. *Sravana, manana* and *nididhyasana* should be done until the distinction between knower, known and knowing no longer arises.'

After Sri Bhagavan had explained all this to me I decided to stay always in his presence and to carry out the practices he prescribed.

In those early days of my stay at Skandashram, as I always used to remain close to Sri Bhagavan, I found that I could get all my doubts cleared merely by listening to all the answers to other devotees' questions. Moreover, by listening to all these answers I was able to learn many new aspects of Sri Bhagavan's teachings. I rarely had to ask a question myself. Usually, if I was waiting for an opportune moment to raise a question on some spiritual topic, another devotee would ask Sri Bhagavan that very same question. Sri Bhagavan's answer would then clear the doubts of both of us. This method of acquiring knowledge is known in the scriptures as *daiva gathi.* A good example of *daiva gathi* can be found in *Vasishtam* where it is said that King Janaka got his doubts cleared and attained knowledge by hearing the conversation of some *siddhas.*

In books such as *Vedanta Chudamani* three ways of getting realisation, *daiva gathi, viveka gathi* and *viraktha gathi,* have been mentioned. To approach a *Sadguru* and to obtain knowledge by both learning the spiritual texts and by practising discrimination is called *viveka gathi. Viraktha gathi* is the instantaneous dawn of knowledge, like a bolt of lightning, irrespective of age and environment. *Jnanis* such as the Buddha,

Pattinathar and Sri Bhagavan are examples of this *viraktha gathi*. *Vasishtam*, an authoritative text, proclaims, 'Like fruit falling unexpectedly from above, true knowledge arises easily'.

A person who goes to have the *darshan* of a realised soul without any desire finds the latter answering the spiritual questions of his disciples. On hearing them, because of past merits, realisation dawns immediately like the lighting up of an electric bulb at the press of a switch. This is known as *daiva gathi*. The good karmas performed in many past births become the cause of attaining knowledge by any of the three ways mentioned above. Many other scriptural texts proclaim the same truth.

Stories from Gurumurtam and Virupaksha Çave

Palaniswami, one of Sri Bhagavan's earliest attendants, was born at Vadavanur, near Palghat in Kerala. At the time when Sri Bhagavan first went to stay in Gurumurtam in the 1890s Palaniswami was also living in Tiruvannamalai as a *sadhu*, performing daily worship to the Vinayaka image that was installed on Ayyankulam Street. When he heard people speaking very highly of Sri Bhagavan, then known as Brahmana Swami, he went and had his *darshan*. After only one *darshan* he was filled with peace and bliss. From that time on, service to Brahmana Swami became his sole concern. He was older than Sri Bhagavan by about thirty years, so when he saw the austere young swami radiating the light of knowledge in silence, he felt a fatherly affection towards him and started looking after him with great care. If Palaniswami happened to go out, then, in order to stop visitors from troubling Sri Bhagavan, he would lock the door of Gurumurtam and return as quickly as possible. At that time in Sri Bhagavan's life, no one could approach Brahmana Swami without first getting permission from Palaniswami. Since Sri Bhagavan was in those days performing severe *tapas* and was unable to fend for himself, this kind of protection appeared to have been arranged by Sri Arunachaleswara himself.

When Sri Bhagavan moved to Virupaksha Cave after a year-and-a-half stay at Gurumurtam, Palaniswami also went with him. Palaniswami had always lived very simply: he only ever wore an ordinary towel around his waist and never kept more

than two at a time. The vessels he used were all made of baked mud. There was not even a metal tumbler among them. When the devotees who came to Virupaksha Cave to see Sri Bhagavan asked for water, they too had to drink from an earthen mug. Someone suggested that he keep a proper tumbler for the sake of those who did not like to drink in this way, but he ignored their advice. Even when devotees offered to buy one, he refused to accept their suggestion. Because he did not accept anything from anyone, he could act in a straightforward way without fear or favour. He had the courage to ignore everything in the world except his service to Sri Bhagavan.

At the beginning of Sri Bhagavan's stay in Virupaksha Cave some *sadhus* who had already established ashrams on the hill found many of the devotees who used to come to them beginning to go to Virupaksha Cave for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. Fearing that this might result in a decline in their reputation, they started harassing Sri Bhagavan in several ways. Sri Bhagavan knew what they were doing, but out of compassion he felt that he should not retaliate and cause them any trouble and anxiety. Instead, he decided to leave the mountain and live in a nearby forest.

On several occasions Sri Bhagavan had had an unusual experience in which his body would disappear in a flash and disperse into its component atoms. A little later a smoke-like form would appear and the atoms would come together in a form that resembled particles of mist. Finally, the body would reappear in its normal form. Sri Bhagavan used to have this experience whenever he remained in the same position for a long time or when his body got emaciated because he was not taking enough food. This state, in which the body disintegrates into atoms and merges with the five elements, is known as '*pranava* body'.

When Sri Bhagavan left Virupaksha Cave to avoid the harassment of the *sadhus*, he decided first to go to the forest near Pachaiamman Temple, on the north-east side of the hill, and fast so that he could enter the state of *pranava* body. As he was entering the forest, Vasudeva Sastry saw Bhagavan. At that time he was a boy studying in the local *Veda Patasala*, a school for teaching brahmin boys vedic traditions.

He ran up to him and said, 'You have come here all alone. Let us go back to Virupaksha Cave.'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'I will return after staying in the forest for a couple of days. You go back by yourself.'

Vasudeva, who was unwilling to leave Sri Bhagavan alone in the forest, began to cry, so Sri Bhagavan pacified him by saying that he would come back soon. He sent him back and walked a little distance towards the forest.

Before he was able to disappear into the trees, Sri Bhagavan encountered a bullock cart containing a passenger – Sri Sattappa Swamigal, the head of Isanya Math. He was returning from a journey on which he had been inspecting the land that belonged to the *math*. He recognised Sri Bhagavan, alighted from the cart and walked rapidly towards him in order to greet him. He was very happy to meet Brahmana Swami so unexpectedly.

He called out to Sri Bhagavan, 'Swami! I did not think I would be meeting you here. It is my great good fortune that I got your *darshan* today. For a long time I have been eager to take you to our *math*, but since I felt that you would not agree to come, I have not previously asked. Now that I have this golden opportunity, you must certainly come.'

Sri Bhagavan, who did not like to visit such places, tried to decline his invitation, but Sri Sattappa Swamigal ignored his refusal. Sri Bhagavan was weak and thin on account of his long and arduous *tapas*, so when the well-built swami lifted him up and put him in the cart, he was unable to offer any resistance. The head of the *math* took Sri Bhagavan, the treasure found on the way, to his *math*, offered him a special seat, fed him and treated him with great reverence and devotion. Sri Bhagavan did not like the special treatment that was being given to him.

He told the head of the *math*, 'I am unable to accept all this ostentation. I am leaving.'

Sri Sattappa Swamigal dissuaded him by saying, 'You can stay here in any way you like. Just please be kind enough to stay with us for some more time.'

Sri Bhagavan found that he could not go against their wishes and ended up spending one week in the *math*. At the end of that period, finding that he could not stay there any longer, he slipped out of the *math* early one morning and went to stay in the Pavalakundru Temple, a shrine located on top of a large hillock on the northern side of Tiruvannamalai.

Sri Sattappa Swami was extremely disappointed when he discovered that Sri Bhagavan had left, but when he came to

learn that Sri Bhagavan was staying nearby at Pavalakundru, he came, saw him and arranged to send him food every day via the chief of the Pavalakundru Math, who also belonged to the Isanya Math. We must be eternally grateful to Sri Sattappa Swamigal: his limitless devotion bound Sri Bhagavan and prevented him from getting into a state, the *pranava* body, where we could not have seen him. He thus gave all of us the opportunity of redeeming ourselves by having his *darshan*.[2]

This feeding arrangement was only a temporary one. During many of the years that Sri Bhagavan lived in Virupaksha Cave, he received food from the Sadhu's Choultry in town. This was an institution that gave free food every day to *sadhus*. The founder of the choultry, Karaikkudi S. N. Sattappa Chettiar, and his wife used to have food prepared under their direct supervision and offer it to all the *sadhus* who came there. This Chettiar was very devoted to Sri Bhagavan and came to see him regularly. One day, when he came as usual to have *darshan*, he appealed to Sri Bhagavan to take at least a handful of cooked rice from this *sadhu's* choultry every day. He said that it would

[2] A somewhat different account of this story was told by Bhagavan himself in *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam* (27.6.47). In that version he was on a *pradakshina* when he was accosted by Sattappa Swami. According to Bhagavan, it was Sattappa Swami's disciples who picked him up and put him in the cart, not Sattappa Swami himself. In this account Bhagavan dates the event at around 1904.

A third account, told by Vasudeva Sastry, can be found in *Day By Day With Bhagavan* (5.10.46). Bhagavan confirmed that this was one of three attempts he made to run away from his ashrams on the hill. Vasudeva Sastry's account differs in important respects from both Bhagavan's and Kunju Swami's. Though it was told in Bhagavan's presence, Bhagavan did not appear to contradict him.

Kunju Swami seems to be confusing details from two of the 'running away' stories. The first escape bid was when Bhagavan ran away from the *sadhus* who were pestering him on the hill. The second was the one in which he was put in the cart.

I spoke to Kunju Swami about the *pranava* body since it does not appear anywhere else in the ashram literature. He conceded that he had got the story second-hand, and not from Bhagavan himself. He told me that he had never personally seen Bhagavan enter or leave this state but added that the story was a matter of common knowledge when he was staying at Skandashram.

be a great blessing to them all if he did so. The request was accepted and from then on Palaniswami used to fetch cooked rice from their choultry every day.

After returning to Virupaksha Cave Palaniswami would put the food aside and then read with great difficulty one chapter from the Malayalam version of *Adhyatma Ramayana*. He would only serve food to Sri Bhagavan after he had completed his reading. When Sri Bhagavan had eaten, he would eat whatever remained.

This *Adhyatma Ramayana*, composed by Thunjath Ramanujan Ezhutacchan, generally regarded as the father of Malayalam literature, is held in great veneration in Kerala, Palaniswami's home state. Pious people there read a part of it every day before eating their food.

As Sri Bhagavan became better known, devotees would come from town or further afield, and they too had to be fed. On such occasions, because of Palaniswami's slow reading, they would be kept waiting for their food. Sri Bhagavan felt that it was not good to keep hungry people waiting.

With the idea of avoiding this inconvenience, he called to Sri Palaniswami one day, 'Palaniswami, must you read this chapter yourself? Or will you be satisfied if you hear it read by someone else?'

Palaniswami replied, 'It is enough if I hear it read'.

The next day Sri Bhagavan took the book and asked Palaniswami to explain the sounds of the letters to him and found that most of the Malayalam script was a combination of Tamil and *granta* [a script that many Tamilians used to write Sanskrit] characters, both of which were already known to him from his schooldays at Madurai. He learned from Palaniswami the few letters he did not know and then began to read daily from the *Adhyatma Ramayana*. He mastered the script quickly and was able to read out portions of the book very fluently within three days.

His proficiency was not limited to reading. He mastered the language almost immediately, to the astonishment of everyone. Many natives of Kerala, when they came to the ashram, were taken aback on hearing him speak in faultless Malayalam. As his proficiency in reading Malayalam increased, Sri Bhagavan read other works in that language such as *Yoga Vasishtam*. He was so deeply moved by some passages in it, he often could not

proceed with the reading. His identification with the characters was so complete, he forgot he was reading a book.

When he had fully mastered the language, he began to write Malayalam poetry. He translated *Upadesa Saram* and *Ulladu Narpadu*[3] into Malayalam verses so well, even Malayalam scholars hesitated before suggesting any changes in them. I once took some of these Malayalam verses composed by Sri Bhagavan to a well-known Malayalam professor for his opinion. The professor marvelled at the purity of diction achieved by a writer whose mother tongue was not Malayalam but, after much hesitation, he ventured to point to a few expressions here and there that he thought were not quite in accordance with Malayalam usage.

Sri Bhagavan used to master the contents of any book he read very quickly. He would go through a book, glancing here and there, and then put it down. But if anyone wanted an explanation of any particular point in it, he was always ready with it. His memory was extraordinary. He would get a poem by heart after reading it once or twice. He used to say that he knew which stanza followed which by the sequence of sense. It is no wonder that he learned Malayalam so quickly and so thoroughly!

Sri Bhagavan wrote *Upadesa Saram* in four different languages. The Telugu and Sanskrit versions are in couplets, the Tamil in three-line stanzas, the Malayalam, in four-line verses. Even Muruganar, if he had any doubts about the meaning of a particular verse of *Upadesa Saram*, would refer to the expanded Malayalam version. The Malayalam composition has another feature that the others lack. Spiritual treatises usually conclude with a *phalasruti*, one or more verses which describe the benefits that will accrue to those reading the work. Up till the time that Sri Bhagavan composed *Upadesa Saram* in Malayalam, he had avoided giving *phalasrutis* to any of his works, though he had translated *phalasrutis* into Tamil from Sanskrit in works such as *Dakshinamurti Stotra*. However, in the Malayalam *Upadesa Saram* he added two *phalasruti* verses because he was requested to do so by Balakrishna Swami, a Malayali devotee.

[3] These works were composed in the late 1920s. By then Bhagavan had been a fluent Malayalam speaker for more than twenty years.

I had a minor role in the composition of these Malayalam *phalasrutis*. One day, when I entered the hall, Sri Bhagavan showed me the first draft of these verses. I noticed the line 'O Girls! ... all of you dance and clap *kummi* along with this *Upadesa Saram*' and asked whether *kummi* was for womenfolk alone. Sri Bhagavan gave no answer.[4]

The next day when Muruganar entered the hall Sri Bhagavan told him, pointing at me, 'I have changed the word "girls" into "devotees" since he expressed a doubt'.

Then, turning to me, he asked, 'Are you satisfied?'

This is the final draft of the two Malayalam verses that Sri Bhagavan felt obliged to correct because of my query:

> Being well established in Self-abidance, joyfully sing this *Upadesa Saram*, clapping one's hands in the *kummi* dance. Freedom from all misery and eternal bliss will be attained. There is no doubt about this.
> O devotees! So that misery may leave completely without afflicting you, and so that bliss may be obtained, all of you dance and clap *kummi* along with this *Upadesa Saram*.

It was at Virupaksha Cave that Sri Bhagavan acquired his vast erudition. Palaniswami used to borrow books such as *Kaivalyam*, *Vedanta Chudamani* and *Jnana Vasishtam* from Nagalinga Swami, a devotee who lived in town. As there were not many devotees in those days, Sri Bhagavan could read the books in Virupaksha Cave without being disturbed. Going through the books he was surprised to find his own state described and extolled in great detail. He has said that while

[4] *Kummi* means 'a rhythmical clapping'. The original Tamil version of this work, entitled *Upadesa Undiyar*, had in each verse a word that means 'jump and fly', possibly given as an invitation to celebrate the philosophy that was given out in the remainder of the verse. This particular style of poetry was derived from Manikkavachagar, a Tamil saint who composed mystical poetry about a thousand years ago. Many of Manikkvachagar's poems had refrains, similar to 'jump and fly', that came from children's games, particularly those played by young girls. The *kummi* generally indicates a metre or tempo. In this context it is the rhythmical clapping that accompanies the dance. Though the 'jump and fly' refrain is rarely translated, it adds an element of joy and celebration to what is otherwise a rather dry philosophical text.

he was reading those books he felt as if he were suddenly remembering something he had long forgotten. Palaniswami also studied the books with Bhagavan. Over a period of six years he was able to obtain a great knowledge of the scriptures.

In later years, when additional devotees started staying with Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave, the food obtained from the *sadhu's* choultry was found to be insufficient for everyone. The devotees then decided that they would get their food by begging in town. Each day they would go to town in the late afternoon to beg for and collect food.[5] Later that day, they dined on the *bhiksha* food back at Virupaksha Cave and any leftovers were used the next morning. Instead of waiting in front of each house and asking for food, which is the traditional way that religious mendicants beg in India, the devotees would walk along each street singing *Akshara Malai*, a hymn composed by Adi-Sankara. It was only necessary to beg in the evenings because the food eaten at midday was brought by Echammal, Mudaliar Patti, Kannammal and others.

When the householders in town heard this Sankara song being sung, they would know that the group was Sri Bhagavan's devotees. They would then come out of their houses and offer clean, fresh food. However, some local *sadhus* from the town came to hear about this routine. They started singing the same song and began collecting the ashram's food before Sri Bhagavan's devotees had even got to town. Only when Sri Bhagavan's devotees came singing for *bhiksha* did the householders realise that they had been deceived by the other *sadhus*.

Palaniswami, Perumal Swami and some others went and told Sri Bhagavan that if he composed some other songs for their use while going for *bhiksha*, it would put an end to the problem caused by the other *sadhus*. They also told him that such songs would help those who offered *bhiksha* to identify the group. Acting on their suggestion and request, Sri Bhagavan composed *Aksharamanamalai*, a Tamil poem of 108 verses in praise of Arunachala. The devotees then began to sing it regularly when they went into town for *bhiksha*.[6]

[5] Begging for food in this way is called 'going for *bhiksha*'. *Bhiksha* is the food that is offered.

[6] Bhagavan would occasionally joke that '*Aksharamanamalai* fed

The practice of going to town for *bhiksha* had stopped a few months before my arrival because most of the residents had abandoned the town to avoid catching the plague. The number of people staying at Skandashram had also fallen. A few weeks after I came, the danger of plague receded and Sama Iyer, Iswara Swami and several other devotees who had earlier left because of the plague returned.

In the early 1900s a new marriage hall was built in the big Arunachaleswara temple. When the *Navaratri* celebrations[7] were being conducted in it for the first time, Palaniswami went to watch. After witnessing the spectacle for some time he felt a desire to bring Sri Bhagavan along to witness the celebrations. He thought that Sri Bhagavan would like to see and enjoy the beautiful decorations that were adorning Sri Apeetakuchamba.[8] In those days Sri Bhagavan and Palaniswami were living alone in Virupaksha Cave. Thinking that he would easily be recognised in the temple if he were accompanied by Palaniswami or other devotees, Sri Bhagavan decided to go alone in disguise. Wearing Palaniswami's towel around his waist and putting a Vaishnavite mark on his forehead, he reached the temple at ten o'clock in the evening. He started off in a fit of enthusiasm, but because he was apprehensive that he might be recognised, he was constantly looking around him. He could not appreciate the beauty of the goddess because he was worrying too much about the possibility of being discovered. Although his going in disguise did not inconvenience anyone, he felt uneasy at practising even this small deception.

He had *darshan* of the goddess and was about to return home when a temple priest recognised him and exclaimed with delight, 'Hey! Hey! All of you come here and see! Brahmana Swami is giving *darshan* as Vishnu.'

The priest took the garland that was adorning the goddess

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us for many years'. See *Day By Day With Bhagavan* (9.12.45) for Bhagavan's own description of how the devotees begged while singing this song.

[7] Navaratri (meaning 'nine nights') is a ten-day festival, usually occurring in October, in which a different aspect of female divinity is worshipped on each day. The final culminating day, Vijayadasami, is a celebration of the triumph, through divine power, of good over evil.

[8] This is one of the local names of Parvati, the consort of Siva.

and put it on Sri Bhagavan. All the other priests assembled to watch the scene. Sri Bhagavan found himself in an embarrassing situation and wanted to leave immediately but before he could do so, one of the priests put various items of *prasad* on a leaf and gave it to him. He accepted the leaf but immediately afterwards left the temple and returned to Virupaksha Cave. He never went back to the temple again.

Sri Bhagavan was sometimes looked down on by people who had had no direct experience of his greatness because he did not come from a traditional line of Gurus. Having learned that Sri Bhagavan had not accepted anyone as his Guru and had not taken *sannyasa* in the traditional way, a pandit knowledgeable in the *sastras* came from the Sringeri Math to meet Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave in order to persuade him to join his lineage. As Palaniswami had gone to the *sadhu's* choultry to fetch food, the pandit got an opportunity to speak to Sri Bhagavan for a whole hour about the greatness of initiation and the necessity of having a Guru. He conceded that Sri Bhagavan was already in a very high state, for he spoke at length on the lives of great incarnations such as Rama, Krishna, Adi-Sankara and many others and remarked that it was extremely rare to see a *tapasvin*[9] like Sri Bhagavan. Then, with great reverence and devotion, he held his palms together and made the following appeal to Sri Bhagavan.

'Swami! As you are a brahmin, you must accept *sannyasa* in the traditional way. You already know everything, so what else is there that I can tell you? However, I am very eager to include you in the lineage of our Gurus. If Swami will give his permission, I am ready to make all the arrangements for his initiation into *sannyasa*. If you are not willing to wear full ochre robes, you must agree to wear at least an ochre loincloth.'

Sri Bhagavan listened to all this without saying anything. The pandit then left, saying that he was going to town, but he promised to come back by 3 p.m. that day.

Within fifteen minutes of his departure an elderly gentleman arrived with a small bundle and said to Sri Bhagavan with some excitement, 'My train, which should have arrived here at 8 a.m.,

[9] A *tapasvin* is someone who has performed or who is performing a lot of *tapas*. *Tapas* is arduous spiritual practice, often involving physical discomfort or bodily mortification.

finally got here at ten. I have not had my bath, nor have I performed my *sandhya vandanam* [a set of prayers repeated thrice-daily by some male brahmins]. Let me keep this bundle here. You can keep an eye on it for me. I will go, have my bath and be back soon.'

The man left his bundle and hurried away.

Sri Bhagavan was puzzled. 'This person does not seem to have come here before,' he thought, 'but his face appears familiar. No one who knows me well would ask me to look after a bundle.'

Still wondering about the owner, he looked at the bundle and found that it contained a towel, some clothes and a few books. On seeing those books Sri Bhagavan, who usually never touched anything belonging to others, suddenly felt an intense urge to open the books and read them.[10] With great eagerness he untied the bundle, looked at the topmost book and found it to be a copy of *Arunachala Mahatmyam* in the original Sanskrit.[11] Sri Bhagavan, who before that day had only come across the *Arunachala Puranam* written in Tamil, took the newly found book and opened it at random. Seeing two interesting verses on that page, he copied them on a piece of paper, put the book

[10] I think Major Chadwick would disagree with Kunju Swami's assertion that Bhagavan never touched other people's possessions. The following extract is from *A Sadhu's Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, pp. 23–4:

'In the early years of my stay I was living in the big room adjoining the ashram storeroom. Here Bhagavan often used to visit me, usually when he went out at about ten o'clock.... If one carried on with what one was doing, then he would himself take a seat and talk quite naturally without the formality which usually surrounded him in the hall. I had no idea how lucky I was and how privileged, but I certainly appreciated the visits. He might pick up my pocket book and take everything out of it: a photograph, a membership card, and any odds and ends it might contain, remark on each thing and ask some question about it. It might have been embarrassing but luckily there was nothing questionable in the wallet. Not that Bhagavan would have minded, for there could be nothing questionable or otherwise for him.'

[11] This work, part of the *Skanda Purana*, is one of the principal records of the myths, legends and traditions associated with Arunachala. The *Arunachala Puranam*, mentioned in the next sentence, is a long Tamil poem that contains much of the same material.

back and retied the bundle. Palaniswami then arrived with his food. After eating his food Sri Bhagavan looked for the bundle but could not find it anywhere. He asked Palaniswami about it but the latter replied that he had not seen any such bundle. The elderly person who had deposited it never came back and the mystery of the disappearing parcel was never solved.

At 3 p.m. when the pandit returned Sri Bhagavan showed him the piece of paper on which he had copied the two verses from the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*:

> What cannot be acquired without endless pains – the true import of Vedanta – is easily attained by all those who can directly sight this hill or even mentally think of it from afar.
> I [Siva] ordain that residence within three *yojanas* [about thirty miles] of this hill shall by itself suffice to burn off all defects and effect union with the Supreme, even in the absence of initiation.

These two verses were later translated into Tamil by Sri Bhagavan and are now in his *Collected Works*. After reading the verses the pandit prostrated humbly before Sri Bhagavan and took leave of him without bothering him any more on the subject of initiation. He went back to Sringeri and narrated this incident to Sri Narasimha Bharati Swamigal, the head of the *math* there.

The Swami was unhappy when he heard that one of his followers had unnecessarily pestered Sri Bhagavan to take initiation. He firmly ordered him not to engage in any such activities again.

There was another occasion when someone tried to initiate Sri Bhagavan. A *sadhu* called Bhagavatar Swami lived near Sri Bhagavan and often tried to make trouble for him. This man would travel to North India, where he would impersonate Sri Bhagavan. Claiming to be Ramana Maharshi, he would collect money from credulous people. Once, after a long absence, he suddenly appeared before Sri Bhagavan with a long beard and wearing a very strange dress.

Looking very serious, he told Sri Bhagavan, 'I am coming straight from the Himalayas. I had a dream in which the Lord appeared to me and commanded me, "Go back at once to Arunachala. My child Ramana is doing nothing. He is wasting

his time. He should be taught some spiritual discipline. To start with, initiate him into this mantra."

'Then he gave me this mantra very secretly. Tomorrow I will come to initiate you. Have your bath and be ready.'

The next day Bhagavatar Swami came with great pomp and with all the materials needed for the initiation ceremony. Sri Bhagavan was again by himself. Bhagavatar began the ceremonies. At the appropriate moment he urged Sri Bhagavan to come forward and receive the mantra initiation. Sri Bhagavan was more amused than perturbed.

He smiled and said. 'You have been told by the Lord in your dream to give mantra initiation to me. Let the same Lord appear to me in my dream and bid me to take the mantra initiation from you. And then we will see.'

Because Sri Bhagavan was often alone in Virupaksha Cave, it was fairly easy for mischief-makers to come there and cause some kind of trouble. Two more instances spring to mind.

In South India there was once a *sadhu* who would crush green chillies and smear the paste all over his body. This he did several times a day. He was known as Milakai Siddhar, or Chilli Swami. Chilli paste is such hot stuff, even if one merely touches it with a finger, there is an immediate burning sensation. This swami who could smear green chilli paste all over his body without feeling any discomfort was naturally famous.

One day, this *sadhu's* disciple came to Sri Bhagavan and found him alone. Palaniswami and Perumal Swami had gone to town on business. The disciple told Sri Bhagavan that since his master had this chilli bath very frequently, he felt he must give a similar bath to Sri Bhagavan as well. Sri Bhagavan did not say 'yes' or 'no'. He just kept quiet. That was his invariable response when people came to pester him with silly suggestions. Taking Sri Bhagavan's silence for consent, he prepared the chilli paste and quickly smeared it on every inch of Sri Bhagavan's body.

This is how Sri Bhagavan described the experience: 'What to do? He went on smearing the green chilli paste over my body. For the first few minutes my body felt severe burning sensations, but after a while the whole system felt cool. I actually liked it. It was so pleasant. There were no after effects, then or later.'

On yet another occasion when Palaniswami and Perumal Swami had gone to town, leaving Sri Bhagavan all alone, a few

fierce-looking *bairagis* [wandering *sadhus*][12] came to Virupaksha Cave.

Finding Sri Bhagavan seated alone, they told him with great vehemence, 'We have come straight from the Vindhya Hills. We had *darshan* of the great *siddha* there. He has commanded us to bring you over there. So, we are taking you along with us back to the Vindhyas, as ordered by the great *siddha*.'

Sri Bhagavan, as usual remained silent and unmoved. But the *bairagis*, as was their wont, started behaving in a very noisy way. Some woodcutters who witnessed this drama went down the hill and told Perumal Swami about the wild-looking *bairagis* who were troubling Sri Bhagavan. Perumal Swami immediately came back, found out what they wanted and then went back to town. Returning some time later he brought with him a big vessel and tins of oil. He put them in front of the ruffians and started gathering firewood. Neither the *bairagis* nor Sri Bhagavan could make any sense of Perumal Swami's strange behaviour. The former, of course, did not even know who Perumal Swami was.

When, curiosity getting the better of them, they enquired who he was and what he was up to, Perumal Swami put the big vessel on the fire and said, 'I belong to the next village. I had a vision last night of the great *siddha* of the Vindhyas. He commanded me, "Go to Virupaksha Cave. You will find some *bairagis* there. They are *siddhas* too, having great powers. Pour boiling oil on them and they will be alive and untouched by the oil." To my great surprise, when I came to this cave, as told by the *siddha*, you were all here. What a fool I was to doubt the holy words of the great *siddha*! Immediately I rushed to town and brought the vessel and the tins of oil. Would I not incur a curse if I disobey the *siddha*?'

When Perumal Swami went inside the cave to put his clothes there, the *bairagis*, thinking he was serious, took to their heels. Sri Bhagavan and Perumal Swami both had a big laugh as they watched them retreat down the hill.

In Sri Bhagavan's early years at Arunachala, before he started to get famous, many people first got to hear of his greatness

[12] Though they style themselves as wandering *sadhus, bairagis* have a reputation for wild and undisciplined behaviour. Many of them regularly take drugs such as cannabis, ostensibly as a sacrament.

through the word-of-mouth recommendations of famous *sadhus* and swamis. One such man, Narayana Swami, was partly responsible for causing Sri Bhagavan's reputation to spread. He used to come to Virupaksha Cave regularly for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* from 1914 onwards. All of us used to address him respectfully as 'Navanna Swami'. He was very well known in Kovilur Math and on his visits to Tiruvannamalai he used to stay in Isanya Math and visit Sri Bhagavan at Virupaksha Cave. He was a genuine renunciant, endowed with clear spiritual knowledge, and he had a unique way of teaching Vedanta. During one of his visits Sri Bhagavan handed him a sheet of paper on which he had just then completed copying *Arunachala Ashtakam*. On that particular day some *math* heads who knew a lot of Vedanta had also come along with a few other devotees. Navanna Swami read the verses out loud at a slow steady pace so that he could follow their meaning and others could hear him. When he came to the film simile in verse six, he asked Sri Bhagavan for clarification as this analogy was not to be found in the ancient vedantic works. After hearing Sri Bhagavan's explanation, he understood the import of the verse and also realised the true state of Sri Bhagavan. The verse, which explains how the mind creates the world, goes as follows:

> You alone exist, O Heart, the radiance of awareness! In You a mysterious power dwells, a power which without You is nothing. From it [this power of manifestation] there proceeds, along with a perceiver, a series of subtle shadowy thoughts that, lit by the reflected light of the mind amid the whirl of *prarabdha,* appear within us as a shadowy spectacle of the world and appear without as the world perceived by the five senses as a film is projected through a lens. Whether perceived or unperceived, these [thoughts] are nothing apart from You, O Hill of Grace.[13]

[13] I once asked Kunju Swami how Bhagavan managed to acquire a working knowledge of film projection systems during the early years of this century. He was using this analogy in *Self-Enquiry* as early as 1902. *Arunachala Ashtakam* was composed in 1913.

Kunju Swami laughed and replied, 'I don't know. We always used to wonder where he got his practical knowledge from. He lived a very unworldly life with Palaniswami, yet somehow he amassed a vast

Till then Navanna Swami had merely thought of Sri Bhagavan as a great *tapasvin*. On reading these verses he came to realise that Sri Bhagavan was a *sthita prajna* [one who is established in the supreme state of wisdom] who had vedantic experience and the clarity of both direct and indirect knowledge. The other *math* heads who were with him that day also realised Sri Bhagavan's greatness. Subsequently, many others came to know of the greatness of Sri Bhagavan through the recommendations of these people. As a result, scholar-*sadhus* started coming to see Sri Bhagavan.

During the period when I was serving Sri Bhagavan at Skandashram, this same Narayana Swami, who had come there for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, called me aside and instructed me on how to serve the Guru by explaining in detail a verse from *Vedanta Chudamani*. *Aptam,* he said, is to learn the scriptural rules of conduct appropriate to a disciple so that one can serve the Guru favourably. *Angam* is to find out the needs of the Guru's body so that one can serve him accordingly. *Dhanam* is to look after ashram properties such as cattle, plants and trees with infinitely greater care than that bestowed by householders on their own property. *Sad bhava* is to view everything as Guru *swarupa* [the real form or nature of the Guru].

After explaining clearly and in detail all the above-mentioned methods of serving the Guru, he concluded by saying that if one practised them faithfully one could realise *Brahman* without the aid of any other spiritual practice. I served Sri Bhagavan according to these instructions and even now I have the good fortune of meditating on Guru *swarupa*.

One of the earliest people to recognise Sri Bhagavan's greatness, and to inform others of it, was Achyutadasa, a famous poet and scholar. When Sri Bhagavan was staying in Gurumurtam in the 1890s, a holy man with a bright face came with his disciples for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. After performing *bhajans* for some time, he sat near Sri Bhagavan, caught hold of his feet and hands and immediately went into a state of ecstasy.

When his disciples also approached Sri Bhagavan to catch

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repertoire of practical skills and worldly knowledge. I never met anyone who taught Bhagavan any of these things. He just seemed, quite naturally, to know them.'

hold of his feet, Achyutadasa stopped them saying, 'This is a huge fire. None of you can get close to it'.

He then sang some excellent vedantic songs. As Sri Bhagavan was still remaining in silence at that time he merely witnessed that scene without commenting on it. Finally, the visitor bowed to Sri Bhagavan and left most unwillingly. Only after a few days was it learned that the visitor was Achyutadasa, a famous person who had composed many vedantic songs in Tamil. He later sent a book of his vedantic songs for Sri Bhagavan's perusal.

In the years Sri Bhagavan lived at Virupaksha Cave, he wandered freely all over the mountain. He was to say in later years that there was no part of it that he had not fully explored. On one occasion he even managed to see inside the hill and explore some of its internal mysteries. This strange experience happened on a day when he was sitting in Virupaksha Cave. Without any prior warning or preparation he suddenly found himself entering a state that he said was neither waking nor dreaming. In that new state he found himself entering a cave that was located on Arunachala. Inside the mountain he discovered many pleasant parks, beautiful lakes, and plants and trees covered with flowers and fruit. It was a most wonderful sight. Somehow, the place did not appear new to him. He felt as if he had been there before. At a later date, when Adi-annamalai Temple on the north-west side of Arunachala was being renovated, some people noticed, on the eastern side of the temple, a tunnel leading into the hill. Sri Bhagavan was informed of this discovery and when he went for *pradakshina* the next day he had a look at the tunnel. He noticed that it was similar to the cave he had seen in his vision, but at the time he told no one that it was familiar to him.

When the people in the temple asked him what they should do about it, Sri Bhagavan replied, 'It is not proper for us to examine it. You must close it up.'

The tunnel was closed according to his instructions. Some time later he was surprised to discover a verse in *Arunachala Mahatmyam* that seemed to describe the vision he had had. He translated the Sanskrit verse into Tamil and this version can now be found in his *Collected Works*.[14] On one of his walks on

[14] Bhagavan's own account of this episode, differing in a few respects from Kunju Swami's, can be found in *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*

the mountain Sri Bhagavan attempted to visit a banyan tree in a remote part of the northern slope of Arunachala. The story of what happened is well known but I shall tell it again because it indirectly led, many years later, to an extremely uncomfortable and embarrassing incident in my life.

Sri Bhagavan was once walking on the northern slope of Arunachala by himself. As he was crossing the third of three streams that are there, he noticed a large banyan-tree leaf in the stream bed. He picked it up and was surprised to discover that it was large as a leaf from a teak tree. He looked around to find out where it had come from and saw high up on the mountain a large platform-like rock with a well-spread-out banyan tree near it.[15] Thinking that this must be the banyan tree mentioned in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, he started climbing slowly with the intention of going to see it. As he was climbing up the rough path, slowly and with some difficulty, his left thigh happened to touch a hornets' nest in a bush. Immediately, a swarm of large mountain hornets came out of the nest and stung his left thigh.

Sri Bhagavan stood there patiently, thinking, 'For the misdeed I have committed, I must receive an appropriate punishment'.[16] His thigh became red and swollen. Even though he was in great pain, Sri Bhagavan did not fail to notice and wonder that the hornets gave vent to their fury by stinging only that part of the body that brushed against their nest. As the pain and swelling increased, he forgot all about climbing the hill to see the big banyan tree. Instead, he turned aside and limped slowly and painfully back to Virupaksha Cave.

(15.1.49). The Sanskrit verse is printed there, along with a loose translation. The following is a more literal rendering of Bhagavan's Tamil version:

> [Siva said:] 'Though I was [originally] in the form of fire, I now remain here as a hill of subdued light in order to protect the world. Moreover, I always abide here as a *siddha* [Arunagiri Yogi]. Know that within me shine caves, surging with many enjoyments'.

[15] According to the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, Siva is reputed to sit permanently under a banyan tree on the north slope of Arunachala in the form of a *siddha* called *Arunagiri Yogi*.

[16] The 'misdeed' was disturbing the hornets' home.

Palaniswami, who had been looking after Sri Bhagavan with great care and attention, was shocked to see the swollen thigh. He rubbed sesame oil on the affected area and removed the hornet stings gently with a pair of tweezers. The swelling and the pain subsided very slowly. Years later, when Muruganar heard about this incident from Sri Bhagavan, he wrote a question in the form of a verse to which Sri Bhagavan replied with another verse. Here is Muruganar's verse:

> O Venkata [Sri Bhagavan], when you touched what you thought to be a widely spread, green leafy bush, many hornets stung that very leg, causing it to swell. How is it that you felt repentant as if you had deliberately done that wrong which happened accidentally?

Sri Bhagavan's answering verse was:

> After the leg was placed in such a position that their nest, spread in the midst of a green leafy bush, was disturbed, the hornets stung in a way that made it become swollen. Though it was a wrong that happened accidentally, what would be the nature of one's mind if one did not even repent [of that accidental misdeed]?

In later years Sri Bhagavan narrated this incident several times. Many of us wanted to go to see this famous tree ourselves and years later we got an opportunity to do so. In order to give a little background to the story I should explain that up till 1926, on the evening of Sri Bhagavan's Jayanti day, everyone in the ashram went on *pradakshina* with him. In the years that followed the custom of going for *pradakshina* was still followed, but Sri Bhagavan no longer joined us. One year, when we all felt disinclined to go round the hill without Sri Bhagavan, we decided instead to go to the top of the hill on the morning after Jayanti.

At 5 a.m. on the day of our climb we engaged four coolies and asked them to carry some of our food up to Seven Springs, which is about two thirds of the way to the summit. Before departing, we all prostrated to Sri Bhagavan and got his permission to leave. There were about forty people in our party including S. S. Cohen, Mrs Talyarkan and some devotees who lived in the Bose compound. We walked to Guhai Namasivaya Temple and then split into two groups. The larger group took the normal path to Seven Springs, but seven of us – Munagala

Venkataramiah, Kalyana Sundaram Iyer of the Book Depot, an Englishman called Thomson, his friend, who was the son of a *zamindar*, his caretaker, Muruganar and myself – told the others that we had decided to climb the hill via Pachaiamman Temple. Our group had secretly decided beforehand that we would first go to see the banyan tree, near which Sri Bhagavan had had his encounter with the hornets, and from there join the others at the top of the hill. Using the springs mentioned by Sri Bhagavan to guide us, we started climbing the hill at 6 a.m. By noon we had crossed the three springs and reached a very steep place from which we could see neither the top nor the bottom of the hill. By that time we were totally lost and very bewildered. Muruganar then went missing. We recovered ourselves sufficiently to look for him and found him lying in a bush. When we called out to him he responded by crawling on all fours like a baby.

We asked him, 'Why are you crawling like that?' and he answered, 'How should I walk then?' He was clearly exhausted.

The rest of us seemed to be in an equally bad condition. Venkataramiah was lying down breathless. Kalyana Sundaram Iyer lost the power of speech. Thomson sat still, looking stunned, while his friend and servant were so afraid they began to cry. I, who was responsible for this state of affairs since I had organised this secret expedition, had no idea what to do. I just stood still.

'I am finished,' I thought. 'My end has come but I am not even able to see Sri Bhagavan's face.'

Overwhelmed by sorrow at this prospect I too began to cry. I felt that even if I survived, if I lost any of those who were with me, how could I then go and show my face to Sri Bhagavan? In the event that such a thing happened I decided that there was no alternative for me except suicide. When the thought that I would never be able to see my Bhagavan again became the dominant one in my mind, my whole body shook and I became unaware of my surroundings. Up till then I had never thought of praying to get any of my desires fulfilled. However, in the circumstances, I felt overpowered.

I prayed with all my heart: 'O Bhagavan! Please forgive me and save us from the misfortune of having to die without getting your *darshan*.'

As I prayed in this way I suddenly became aware that a person was cutting wood in the distance. I immediately shouted and

called to him. Fearing that we were from the forest department, he at first refused to come.

Then I waved my ochre cloth and shouted, 'We are from Sri Ramanasramam. We will give you whatever you want. Don't be afraid.'

He came over to us, noticed our miserable state and asked, 'Why have you come here? From here you cannot go to the top of the hill. Where do you want to go?'

When we told him that we wanted to go to Seven Springs, he took each one of us by the hand, carefully brought us back together again and showed us the way. A small cloud came and, like Sri Bhagavan's compassion, it bathed us with a shower. We felt refreshed and reached Seven Springs safely.

The others who had started with us had already gone to the mountain top earlier that morning. Descending, they had reached Seven Springs and eaten their food. They were sitting there, waiting for us to appear. Noticing our torn clothes along with the burned-grass stains and the scratches on our bodies, they of course enquired what had happened to us. As we told our story they jeered at us for unsuccessfully and painfully attempting to see the famous banyan tree without their knowledge.

We sat and ate our food. It was only then that we realised that we had been so stunned by our adventure, we had not even thought of refreshing ourselves by eating the food that we had brought with us.

We stayed at Seven Springs for a while and then came down to Virupaksha Cave. The seven of us thought, 'How can we appear in this state before Sri Bhagavan? What can we say to him?' We were all afraid of facing him for we had not informed him in advance of our plan to find the tree. We had merely told him that we were going to the top of the hill. We sent Thomson and his group to their house in town. Mrs Talyarkan, Mr Cohen and some members of their group also decided to go directly back to their respective homes. That left four of us from the party that had attempted to find the tree. We decided to remain at Virupaksha Cave till it went dark, return to Palakottu, have a bath there and then go to the ashram for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*.

In the meantime, Thomson and his two associates felt that since Sri Bhagavan had saved them in a time of grave danger, they should go home only after having his *darshan*. They hired a horse carriage, went to the ashram and prostrated to Sri

Bhagavan from outside the hall without, they thought, being seen by him. Then they left. Munagala Venkataramiah also decided to follow the same course of action. I, who was not aware of these happenings, had my bath in Palakottu, leisurely reached the ashram at 7 o'clock and prostrated to Sri Bhagavan.

When I got up Sri Bhagavan asked, 'You are standing here after doing what mischief?'

I was completely shaken by his question.

He continued, 'That *zamindar* boy came with burned-grass stains all over him. He prostrated outside the hall and then ran away. Venkataramiah, who arrived in an even worse state, also prostrated outside and then went away. And you, you are appearing before me in all innocence only now. What mischief have you done?'

Immediately I narrated everything that had happened and added, 'Fearing that Sri Bhagavan would not have permitted us to go there if we had told you in advance of our plans, we thought of telling you only after visiting that place. We have been taught a proper lesson for going without telling you. Please forgive us.'

I prostrated again.

Sri Bhagavan said, 'If you had told me of your plans at the outset, I would have asked you not to go there. *Sari, sari* [All right, all right]'.

We took Sri Bhagavan's '*Sari, sari*' as an indication that he had forgiven us and felt relieved.

Life at Skandashram

There was a black rock situated further up the hill from Virupaksha Cave. One day, when Sri Bhagavan was still living in Virupaksha Cave, he went up there and found a moist area beneath this rock. He poked the spot with his walking stick and soon afterwards a small quantity of water oozed out. He told Jada Swami, who had accompanied him, that there might be a spring beneath the rock. In order to verify Sri Bhagavan's surmise as soon as possible, Jada Swami fetched some people and began to excavate there with a crowbar. A spring of clear water was soon discovered and a small pit was dug below it. Subsequently, whenever Sri Bhagavan happened to go to that place, he would bring water from there in his *kamandalu* and use it at Virupaksha

Cave. This newly found spring did not dry up even during the summer months.

This spring eventually became the water source for Skandashram. The development of that ashram began with the arrival of Kandaswami, a devotee from Kongunadu, now located in Coimbatore District. He was one of the devotees who regularly visited Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave. In those days there was no water facility near the cave, nor was there enough room for cooking or for seating the many devotees who came to Sri Bhagavan. With the idea of overcoming these drawbacks, Kandaswami removed the stones and the thorny shrubs that surrounded the black-rock spring. He levelled the surrounding area and prepared a plot of land that was big enough to accommodate a large building. Next, he raised a wall of granite on its eastern slope as a containing wall for a flat, level terrace. He filled up the space behind the wall and on the resultant plot he planted coconut, mango and jack fruit trees. He also raised a flower garden there. Then, with great effort and with the help of Perumal Swami, he first built the present brick building and then persuaded Sri Bhagavan to come and live in it.[17]

After staying there with Sri Bhagavan for some time, Kandaswami went back to his home town. Surprisingly, he never came back to Tiruvannamalai and no one ever heard from him again. Since Kandaswami had played the major part in the development of the now famous Skandashram, in memory of his unparalleled effort, Sri Bhagavan named it after him.

Sri Bhagavan moved into Skandashram in 1915. Initially, Palaniswami also came and stayed with him. However, after a few months he informed Sri Bhagavan that because he was feeling weak and infirm, he would prefer to stay in Virupaksha Cave. From then on, each day when Sri Bhagavan took his daily stroll in the evening, he would visit Palaniswami in Virupaksha Cave and stay with him there for some time. In the weeks that followed Palaniswami got weaker and weaker.

[17] In Sivaprakasam Pillai's account of the construction of Skandashram (*The Power of the Presence, Part One*, p. 41) it is reported that Kandaswami left Tiruvannamalai even before Bhagavan moved to Skandashram. Though Kandaswami did terrace the hillside and plant many trees there, it seems that the main buildings were built after he left and were paid for by donations from other devotees.

One evening, when Sri Bhagavan had come as usual to see Palaniswami, he noticed that his condition was very serious. Sri Bhagavan sat down beside him. After a few minutes, when Palaniswami started to breathe heavily, Sri Bhagavan placed Palaniswami's head on his own lap. Shortly thereafter Palaniswami, that person of great merit, breathed his last. What great austerities he must have performed to have received this great good fortune! It was given to three beings to leave this world with their heads placed on Sri Bhagavan's lap. The first of these fortunate few was Palaniswami. The second one was Sri Bhagavan's mother, and the third one was the cow Lakshmi.[18]

After Sri Bhagavan moved to Skandashram a devotee called K. R. Venkatasubramania Iyer came from Calcutta. He was a prosperous man and he wanted to be of service to the ashram. He consulted Gambiram Seshayyar, who was then responsible for running the ashram's affairs. Seshayyar mentioned that the ashram was already receiving a few cash donations in addition to the food supplied by Echammal, Mudaliar Patti, Kannammal and a few other devotees. Gambiram Seshayyar told Venkatasubramania Iyer that if the ashram could be sure of receiving an additional Rs 40 per month, it would pay for all their food expenses and eliminate the need of going for *bhiksha*. Venkatasubramania Iyer agreed to send Rs 60 every month and

[18] 'Dying in Bhagavan's lap' may be a metaphorical way of saying that all three of them received a major transmission of Bhagavan's grace as they were nearing their death. Lakshmi the cow did not physically die in Bhagavan's lap. In fact, he was not even present at her death. See *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam* (20.7.48) for full details of Lakshmi's death. Valli the deer, who is buried alongside Lakshmi, did, however, die in Bhagavan's lap. There are differing accounts of how the other two animals that are buried alongside Lakshmi died, but most versions agree that the crow died in Bhagavan's hands.

Kunju Swami does not make it clear in this version that the three devotees he mentions (Palaniswami, his mother and Lakshmi the cow) all had the good fortune of having Bhagavan put his hand on their heart-centres shortly before their deaths. Bhagavan used this technique very sparingly, apparently in an attempt to bring about the realisation of certain devotees in their dying moments. He was successful in the cases of his mother and Lakshmi, but unsuccessful in the other cases. See *Living By The Words of Bhagavan*, 1st edition, pp. 82–4 for two other instances of Bhagavan using this technique.

gave the first instalment on the spot. From then onwards, Gambiram Seshayyar, who lived in town, daily sent to Skandashram one day's supply of provisions such as rice, *dhal* and oil in a box that came to be known as 'the post box'. In those days, all the provisions and foodstuffs received during the day would be used immediately. Nothing would be retained for use the next day. It was for this reason that Gambiram Seshayyar only ever sent one day's supply of food.

At Skandashram Sri Bhagavan's mother would get up at 4 a.m. and start reciting devotional hymns. The rest of us would all meditate except for Sri Bhagavan who, after waking at about 3 a.m., would lie half-reclining on his bed. This was the same position he slept in at night. None of us ever saw Sri Bhagavan lying on his bed fully stretched out on his back or his side. Nor did we ever see him with a pillow under his head. He never used to lie down and sleep in a bed like other people. Instead, he would sleep sitting down, in a semi-reclining position, with a few pillows supporting his back. Sometimes he would support his head with his hand while he was sleeping.

At 5 o'clock Sri Bhagavan would go out for about half an hour. During that time we would start reciting *Aksharamanamalai* and complete it by 6 o'clock. Sri Bhagavan, who had returned by then, would go out for his morning bath. We would also bathe at around the same time.

The frugal way in which Sri Bhagavan used oil, soap and water during his morning bath astonished us all. Although he could have had anything he wanted merely by asking, by remaining without possessions Sri Bhagavan taught us the virtue of frugality. His morning bath routine exemplified this in every way.

Both Sri Bhagavan and the devotees cleaned their teeth with tooth powder that was prepared in the ashram. It was kept in small, folded paper packets, with each packet containing a day's requirement for one person. If on any particular day Sri Bhagavan found the tooth powder in his packet to be in excess, he would rewrap it in the same paper and give it back to us. We were expected to keep it carefully and return it to him for his use on the following morning. If we failed to give it to him, he would reprimand us for our carelessness and our lack of thriftiness.

Both at Skandashram and for a few years at Sri

Ramanasramam Sri Bhagavan used *panchakalpam* [a herbal concoction made from five different ingredients] for his bath. Later on we used to extract the milky juice from ripe coconut kernels and make an oil by boiling it. We would then add pepper and *tumbai* flowers and decant the mixture into bottles. Sri Bhagavan used this oil, which was very fragrant and clear, each day when he had a bath. He would take a little of the oil on his palm and rub it on his head while we were getting the hot water ready in the bathroom. Sri Bhagavan would then put a little hot water on his head, mix it with the oil he had put there and apply the resultant oily liquid to his body. Because he did this several times during his bath, the little oil he took at the beginning would be sufficient to cover his entire body. After he had oiled himself in this way, he would pour small quantities of hot water over his body, put a little bath soap in his hand and rub it over his body. In bathing this way he got the maximum benefit from the minimum of materials.

On the eastern side of Skandashram, at the place where the parapet wall is now located, there used to be a large stone slab. We used to place tooth powder and water there so that Sri Bhagavan could clean his teeth after the completion of the recitation of *Aksharamanamalai*. Even on very misty and cold mornings Sri Bhagavan insisted on brushing his teeth only on that particular stone. At that early hour Sri Bhagavan's body shone like gold in the morning sunlight. On very cold mornings devotees used to request him not to sit outside while he brushed his teeth, but Sri Bhagavan ignored their repeated requests. It was only later that we came to know the reason why.

An old woman, Sowbhagyattamma, was living on Big Street, which borders the northern side of the Arunachaleswara Temple. She and some other elderly people had decided that they would only eat their morning food each day after they had had *darshan* of Bhagavan at Skandashram. If any of the regular visitors failed to come for *darshan*, Sri Bhagavan would always notice and make enquiries about their health. So, when Sowbhagyattamma failed to come one morning, he waited until she came the next day and asked her why she had missed a day.

She answered, 'But I had Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* yesterday'.

Sri Bhagavan was surprised. 'But you did not come yesterday'.

Then she told him her story. 'Realising my infirmity, you gave

me the good fortune of having your *darshan* from near my house itself'.

She went on to explain that she could see Sri Bhagavan while he was sitting on the stone, brushing his teeth. She added that as she was not able to climb the hill every day she would henceforth have his *darshan* by looking at him from her own house. From that day onwards, even when the weather was bad, Sri Bhagavan always used to brush his teeth sitting on that stone. This proved convenient to many other elderly devotees who wanted to have his *darshan* but were unable to climb the hill.

At 8 a.m. each morning, when we had all completed our various personal and domestic chores, we would all sit outside with Sri Bhagavan and eat our breakfast. A devotee called Sama Iyer used to get up at 4 a.m. to prepare our breakfast, which in those days usually consisted of *dhal-rasam* and rice. The food would usually be served by Sama Iyer and Ramanatha Brahmachari. After breakfast Sri Bhagavan would sit on his seat on the veranda. Some devotees would meditate near him while others would read books such as *Ribhu Gita.* In this peaceful atmosphere Sri Bhagavan would sometimes clear away the doubts of devotees.

During the day Sri Bhagavan would receive visiting devotees or do odd jobs in and around the ashram. Sometimes he would just sit still, in silence, absorbed in the Self. In the late afternoon he would get up and invariably go for a walk on the hill.

At about 6.30 each evening we would sit before Sri Bhagavan and chant *Aksharamanamalai* again. While we chanted Sri Bhagavan would recline on a pillow with his eyes closed. By the time the *parayana*[19] was over it would be 7.30 and time for our supper. About once every two or three days, during our *parayana,* Sri Bhagavan would get absorbed in *samadhi.* If he did not open his eyes even after the completion of the *parayana,* we would gently call to him. Sri Bhagavan would usually not respond because he would be totally unaware of the external world. In order to wake him up, Perumal Swami, Akhandananda, Mastan Swami and myself would each take up a conch and blow them. The sound of the conches would enter into his motionless consciousness and bring him slowly back to external consciousness. On such nights supper would only be served at 9

[19] *Parayana* is the chanting of a scriptural work.

o'clock. Even after Sri Bhagavan moved to the Mother's *samadhi* he used to go into *samadhi* about once every seven to ten days. On such occasions Dandapani Swami would try to wake him up by firmly holding his feet and moving them, but his attempts would prove futile. It was only possible to wake him up by blowing the conches. As the years passed Sri Bhagavan went into this state less and less.

During the years that Sri Bhagavan stayed at Skandashram, he frequently used to go for *giri pradakshina* with the devotees. There are three *pradakshina* paths: the innermost path goes along the foot of the hill, the middle one is through the jungle and the outermost path is the *pradakshina* road. During daytime we used to go either on the inner path at the foot of the hill or on the path through the jungle. Only at night time would we use the road. Sometimes we went so slowly we would take two or three days to complete the eight-mile *pradakshina*.

When we went for *pradakshina*, we would take with us sufficient food to last for a day. If devotees from town came to know that Sri Bhagavan had started on a *pradakshina,* a man called Jayarama Iyer and some other devotees from town would come with all the necessary provisions to cook food either at Gautama Ashram or Pachaiamman Temple. On such occasions we used to camp for two or three days on the way. While going for *pradakshina* during the wintry nights of January and February we would collect dry leaves and twigs, make a fire and warm ourselves. I, along with a few other devotees, used to walk ahead to make the fire. When Sri Bhagavan and the rest of devotees arrived they would warm themselves for a while before resuming their walk. By the time they reached the next resting place, we would already have made a fire there.

Seeing our activities Sri Bhagavan once quoted a very apt Tamil proverb: '"They have time to gather the dry leaves and twigs, but have no time for warming themselves." This fits these people very well.' And then he laughed.

Such remarks from Sri Bhagavan always elevated our spirits and made us feel very good.

Sri Ramanasramam

About two years after I came to Sri Bhagavan his mother became bedridden on account of repeated attacks of diarrhoea.

Since she was unable to do any of her usual chores, her saris were cleaned and washed by Niranjanananda Swami, her son. When I saw him toiling alone, I too cleaned and washed her clothes and thus had the great good fortune of rendering service to her. Although she received treatment, her condition did not improve. Instead it steadily deteriorated. On the morning of May 19th, 1922, a day that turned out to be the last day of her life, it was clear that she was suffering greatly. She spent the day lying in the room that is located on the southern side of the place where Sri Bhagavan stayed.

After returning from his morning walk, Sri Bhagavan went to the room where his mother was lying, sat by her side and stayed there throughout the day. When evening came, she was panting for breath. Sri Bhagavan, seeing the intensity of her suffering, placed his right hand on her chest, an action that gave her a little relief. Her moment of liberation was fast approaching. Sri Bhagavan continued to sit quietly with one hand on her head and the other on her chest. The other people in the ashram, seeing her condition, felt that it would be good to finish dinner early, by 6 p.m. They put out the leaf plates and called to Sri Bhagavan to come and take his dinner. Sri Bhagavan replied that he would eat later and then asked all the others to go ahead and eat. Niranjanananda Swami and Ramakrishna Swami and I stayed with Sri Bhagavan while the rest went and had their food.

Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni was there, sitting on one side of the ashram. After the meal was over, Raju Sastry, Sundaresa Iyer, Vaidyanatha Sastry and a few others started doing a *Veda parayana*. Simultaneously, Saranagati Ramaswami Iyer, a Punjabi devotee, and many others were loudly chanting the name of Rama. Those of us who stayed near Sri Bhagavan recited *Aksharamanamalai*.

Mother Azhagammal, the meritorious person who begot Sri Bhagavan, was absorbed into the Self at 8 p.m. that evening. Sri Bhagavan sat there in silence for some time before getting up. After he had moved, we covered her body with a new ochre sari, applied *vibhuti* to her forehead, garlanded her and placed her on a seat on the outer veranda.

When these preliminary ceremonies were over, Sri Bhagavan said, 'Now we can eat,' and sat under a tree to take his food.

How can there be pollution or sorrow for a perfect *jnani* who has renounced everything?[20]

Those of us who had remained with Sri Bhagavan also sat down to eat. Afterwards we discussed the construction of a *samadhi* for Sri Bhagavan's mother. As the hill was revered as a *lingam*, it would not have been proper to perform the cremation or the burial on the hill. Furthermore, since it would have been difficult for devotees to come all the way up the hill, it was decided to take the body to the foot of the hill at 5 a.m. the next day. Nayana and some of the others then went down the hill after first arranging to be at Pali Tirtham by 5 a.m. During the night Perumal Swami, Ramakrishna Swami and a few others went down to the town to collect the necessary materials – cement, stone slabs etc. – for the construction of the *samadhi*.

During the night Sri Bhagavan sat near the place where we had put the Mother's body. Brahmachari Arunachala Swami and I sat with him. Brahmachari Arunachala Swami had originally been a cook in the big temple in town before he renounced the world and became a devotee of Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan then announced that the *Tiruvachakam*[21] should be chanted. Sri Bhagavan and the devotees took it in turn to read from the book. While we were reading Sri Bhagavan corrected all the mistakes in our pronunciation as and when we made them. In this way we went through the entire *Tiruvachakam* before 4 a.m. By then the people who had gone to collect the materials for the *samadhi* construction had come back. The bamboo poles that would be necessary for carrying the Mother's body had been obtained serendipitously about four days before. Ramaswami Pillai and I had gone to the top of the hill. Someone who had cut and taken bamboo from there had in the process left a few large pieces, so we brought them down, but with no particular purpose in mind. Now these bamboo poles came in handy.

Sri Bhagavan's sister, Alamelu Amma, who had been sent a

[20] Contact with a dead body would ordinarily put one in a state of ritual pollution in which one would not be able to eat. At the very least one should take a bath, but Bhagavan ignored these two fundamental social rules.

[21] A 9th century collection of devotional poetry, all of it in praise of Siva, composed by the Tamil saint Manikkavachagar.

telegram when mother's condition had deteriorated, was expected at Skandashram. In order to bring her and any other devotees who might come down to Pali Tirtham and to receive from town the 'post box', the name we gave to the container in which our provisions were stored, it was felt that someone should stay behind at Skandashram. It was decided that I should be the one to stay. Sri Bhagavan and the others went down to Pali Tirtham with Perumal Swami and Ramakrishna Swami, who were carrying the Mother's body. Although I was afraid of staying at Skandashram alone in such circumstances, I remained at my post. I received the post box there and came down to join the others by 7 a.m. Mother had been put in a sitting position on the platform under the large peepul tree on the banks of Pali Tirtham. Sri Bhagavan and the others were sitting nearby. An area around the *samadhi* sufficient to seat about 100 people had been cleared. It had originally been covered with cacti. Alamelu Amma, her husband Pitchu Iyer and many other devotees had come. A large crowd had also come from the town. As the news of her *samadhi* had spread in the town during the night devotees had arrived, bringing with them mounds of flowers, fruits, coconuts etc. On one side a *nadaswaram* musician[22] was performing, while on the other side *bhajans* were being sung. Construction of the *samadhi* was going on, following the rules given in *Tirumantiram*, an ancient Tamil work by Tirumular.[23] An *abhishekam* [a consecration ceremony in which liquid is poured over a representation or symbol of a deity] was done with milk, curd and coconut water that had been brought by devotees. It was completed at 10 a.m. after which the body was taken to the *samadhi* spot. *Kusa* grass and *vibhuti* were spread in the *samadhi* pit, in accordance with tradition, before Mother's body was lowered into it. Sri Bhagavan was then given some *vibhuti* and camphor. After he had thrown these into the *samadhi* pit, we too threw a handful of each into the hole. The pit was filled with camphor, bilva leaves, *vibhuti* and brick powder and finally closed with a stone slab. A *lingam* was placed

[22] A *nadaswaram* is a wind instrument resembling a clarinet that is played during many South Indian Hindu rites and festivals.

[23] This ancient work gives detailed instructions on how the tomb of an enlightened being should be prepared. The same rules were followed when Bhagavan's body was interred in 1950.

on top, *naivedya* [consecrated food] offered and a light of burning camphor waved before it.

By now it was twelve noon. We all started for Palakottu. Sri Bhagavan started walking slowly in that direction and the *nadaswaram* player, with the intention of making the best use of this rare opportunity, played superbly, facing Sri Bhagavan all the time and walking backwards. It took more than an hour to reach Palakottu, a distance of around a hundred yards. It was a rare sight to see on the one hand the *nadaswaram* player giving such a superb performance, all the time facing Sri Bhagavan, and on the other hand the beauty of Sri Bhagavan walking slowly to fit the mood of his music. It was a unique occasion for nothing like this ever happened again. The devotees had prepared food in Palakottu and more than a hundred people were fed there. We stayed in Palakottu till evening, did *deeparadhana* [waving of lights] *puja* to the *samadhi* and then returned to Skandashram for the night. Nayana, Mudaliar Patti and other local people went to their respective homes.

Next day, at the suggestion of some devotees, it was decided that on the tenth day a *samadhi puja* should be performed and till then daily food offerings should be made. Accordingly, each day, Chinnaswami and Ramanathan, the son of Yoganatha, brought cooked rice from Skandashram, performed *puja* to the *samadhi* and returned to Skandashram for their lunch. In order to prepare for the tenth day *puja* Sri Bhagavan and some of the devotees, including myself, came down on the previous evening and slept in the Vinayaka Temple in Palakottu. On that particular evening Meenakshi Amma from Tiruchuzhi, Alamelu Amma and several others had prepared very tasty Tiruchuzhi *dosas* for us to eat.

On the next day the *puja* began with an *abhishekam* of milk and *panchamritam* [a sweet preparation with five separate ingredients] and continued on a grand scale with traditional worship, flower decoration etc. Kumbakonam Iyengar Swami had prepared in advance all the items needed for *naivedya*. Food for the visiting devotees was prepared under the supervision of Satram Narayana Iyer in a thatched shed near the Vinayaka Temple at Palakottu. More than a thousand people were fed under a pandal that had been erected under an *iluppai* tree. We stayed till evening, lighted the *moksha deepam* [the light of liberation] and returned to Skandashram with Sri Bhagavan.

Some devotees desired that on the forty-eighth day after these ceremonies had been performed, a special rite known as a *mandala puja* should be performed and till then daily food offerings should be made. This was agreed upon.

When the *mandala pujas* began, cooked food from Skandashram was brought down every day and offered to the *samadhi* at the conclusion of the *puja*. Water for performing *abhishekam* was brought from Palakottu. One day though, after some heavy rains, water collected in a small pit that had been dug while the *samadhi* was being constructed. The soil from the hole, which was about fifty feet from the *samadhi*, had been used during its construction. Even after the rains stopped the water in the pit remained clear and did not dry up. On one of their visits Chinnaswami and Chinna Ramanathan baled out all the water in the hole, but clear water continued to ooze into the hole from an underground spring. They decided to use this water for *abhishekam* and took a sample of it back to Skandashram where they showed it to Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan came down to the *samadhi* site from Skandashram that evening. On seeing this spring water he had a pit a yard square and a yard deep dug on the spot. A large quantity of clear water oozed into the pit. This hole was enlarged still more until it eventually became the large well that is now located in the centre of the ashram. From then till now it has given the ashram a continuous supply of water.[24]

The water from this well is nowadays used for the daily *abhishekam* that is done to both the Mother's and Sri Bhagavan's *samadhis*.

The delivery of cooked food to the devotees who were staying at the *samadhi* was a long and tedious chore, and the return trip to Skandashram in the middle of the day, when the sun was very hot, was an unpleasant one. So, those who were staying at the *samadhi* in order to perform the *pujas* there were sent small quantities of rice and *dhal*. They would cook their own

[24] Though the supply has been 'continuous', it has never been sufficient. In the early days of Sri Ramanasramam everyone except Bhagavan had to go to the Palakottu tank every afternoon to collect two buckets of water for communal ashram use. Nowadays the ashram's water comes from additional wells, bore wells and municipal taps.

food there, eat it, and return to Skandashram in the evening. After some time a small thatched hut was put up near the shrine for cooking, and both Dandapani Swami and Niranjanananda Swami started staying there permanently. This separate establishment was maintained out of the supplies that were sent to Skandashram every day. Since a portion of the provisions being sent to Skandashram was diverted to the devotees at the Mother's *samadhi*, the residents of Skandashram did not have sufficient food for themselves, especially in the evening. Some of the devotees were unhappy with the arrangement. The murmurs of dissatisfaction soon reached the ears of Vasudeva Sastry who was then looking after the management of Skandashram. Vasudeva Sastry, who lived in town, wrote a chit to Ramanatha Brahmachari, who was staying at Skandashram.

It said: 'The devotees are not giving for Vasudeva [Krishna's father] they are only giving for Vaasudeva [one of the names of Krishna].'

Ramanatha Brahmachari showed the note to Sri Bhagavan who remarked, 'Oh! Did Vaasudeva appear without Vasudeva?' When Vasudeva Sastry came to hear about this remark, he decided to say no more on the matter.

There was another similar problem concerning oil that was sent to the Mother's *samadhi*. A photo of Sri Bhagavan, which had been taken at Pachaiamman Temple, was kept in Skandashram near the place where he used to sit. When Mudaliar Patti brought food to Sri Bhagavan, she used to garland this picture, light camphor and prostrate before it. A devotee in the town had arranged for a supply of oil to keep an oil lamp near the picture continuously lit. Oil required for the lamps at the Mother's *samadhi* used to be taken from the supply intended for use at Skandashram. As a result, there was a shortage of oil at Skandashram. Ramanatha Brahmachari, who had taken on the responsibility of keeping the lamp lit, felt troubled but did not want to say anything about it.

The problem was finally resolved when Dandapani Swami and Niranjanananda Swami came up to Skandashram one day and said, 'Bhagavan himself is here. You do not need a picture of him. We want to have the picture at the *samadhi*.'

They took both the picture and the lamp to the Mother's *samadhi* and in this way ended the problem of the oil supply.

Sri Bhagavan occasionally used to visit the Mother's *samadhi*

either in the morning or the evening. He kept up this routine for about five or six months.

One day during this period Chinnaswami told me, 'Come down to the *samadhi* this evening. We have arranged to prepare *dosas* tomorrow morning. You can bring some back for Sri Bhagavan and the others'.

I agreed. After asking Ramakrishna Swami to attend to Sri Bhagavan's personal needs, I went that evening to the Mother's *samadhi*. I got up early the next morning to wash the dishes in the stream near Palakottu.

It was still twilight when I suddenly heard a voice, 'Will there be any food available for a guest?'

I looked up and was thrilled to see Sri Bhagavan standing there. He was holding a stick in his hand, had a cloth wrapped round his body and a towel tied round his head. It was a beautiful and rare *darshan*. Chinnaswami and Dandapani Swami overheard us talking and came out of the hut. They were both overjoyed to see Sri Bhagavan and entreated him to stay with us and have some *dosa*. Sri Bhagavan initially declined, but he finally agreed to their request. He brushed his teeth with a neem twig, washed his face in the stream, came back and sat inside the hut. By that time the usual supply of goat's milk had also arrived. Sri Bhagavan sat with us and had *dosa* and coffee.

Looking at me he said, 'It seems that one by one people are coming and collecting here because they get such nice food'. And then he laughed.

After we had finished breakfast Sadiappa Chettiar visited us. He lived in town and had just visited the Draupadi Amman Temple of which he was a trustee. When he learned that Sri Bhagavan had come down from Skandashram, he immediately went home, loaded into a cart all the provisions necessary for a day's cooking and came with it to the Mother's *samadhi*. He told Sri Bhagavan that his elderly sister was unable to climb the hill, adding that she was feeling unhappy because she could not have his *darshan*. He begged Sri Bhagavan to accept a *bhiksha* [a special meal offered by a devotee] at the *samadhi* itself in the company of his sister and some other people who would soon arrive. Sri Bhagavan felt unable to refuse, so he accepted the request. Some time later when Ramakrishna Swami, who was Sri Bhagavan's attendant at the time, discovered that Sri Bhagavan had not returned to Skandashram, he came down

the hill with some clothes for Sri Bhagavan. Other devotees from Skandashram followed him and the *bhiksha* that day was a great success. The news that Sri Bhagavan had come down the hill and had a *bhiksha* soon spread in the town. Nayana, who usually came to see Sri Bhagavan at Skandashram, came to the *samadhi* along with many other devotees. The festivities lasted all day. When night came Sri Bhagavan and his devotees decided to sleep near the Mother's *samadhi* because it was too dark to return to Skandashram. Early the next morning another devotee unexpectedly arrived with provisions and offered another *bhiksha* to Sri Bhagavan, so Sri Bhagavan was forced to spend yet another day at the *samadhi*. On each of the succeeding days devotees arranged *bhikshas* at the *samadhi*. Sri Bhagavan continued to stay there because he could not say 'no' to any of their loving entreaties.

As we had left many of our things lying around in Skandashram, it was felt that it would be good if someone went back and stayed there. No one volunteered because everyone was afraid of staying there alone. It was eventually decided to send two devotees. Gopal Rao and I were selected for the job, so both of us went back to Skandashram and stayed there. We waited there for a week and were fed on food that was sent up to us from the *samadhi*.

When Sri Bhagavan had not come back by the end of that week we said to each other, 'Have we come to be watchmen without even being in the presence of Sri Bhagavan?'

With these thoughts uppermost in our minds, we both came down the hill.

Chinnaswami saw us coming and asked, 'Why have you returned?'

We replied, 'We could not keep away from Sri Bhagavan any longer'.

No one complained at our behaviour.

Because of the *bhikshas* he was receiving, Sri Bhagavan began to stay permanently at the *samadhi*. A few days later some devotees who went to Skandashram came back and reported that all the doors were open and that all our things had been stolen. We went back immediately and found that a long wooden plank used by Sri Bhagavan, a clock and a few other items had been stolen. We brought the remaining items down to the *samadhi*.

Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'It is good. From now on, no one needs to go there to watch.'

Although he gave other reasons as a pretext, Sri Bhagavan made the Sri Mathrubhuteswara Temple [the official name of the Mother's *samadhi*] his permanent place of residence in order to help elderly devotees like Sadiappa Chettiar's sister who could not climb the hill. By moving, he blessed them with peace of mind. Who can really describe this compassionate act of his?

During the initial days of our stay at the Mother's *samadhi* we used to get up at 4 a.m., complete our morning ablutions and then go with Sri Bhagavan to the Pandava Tirtham at the foot of the hill. Iswara Swami and some other devotees who lived in the corner *mantapam* of the big temple learned about Sri Bhagavan's visits to the tank and joined us there every day. Sri Bhagavan, Iswara Swami and Sama Iyer would lie flat on the water in the *padmasana* posture. The rest of us tried to imitate them.

In those days it used to get very cold at night, and buildings and sleeping materials were minimal. Sri Bhagavan was given a sheet and a pillow and slept on top of a low platform. The rest of us had to make do with mats made of woven coconut leaves that we placed on top of bricks. The devotees used to sleep near Sri Bhagavan's platform because a smouldering charcoal stove would be kept there at night. If there was a shortage of charcoal, we would collect large quantities of tamarind bark to keep the fire going.

Because Sri Bhagavan never slept much, even during the night, we all used to sit around the smouldering charcoal stove with him. At those tranquil periods pearls of wisdom used to fall from his lips. It was a golden period that can never be experienced again. If devotees came from outside, we would give them our sleeping places and go to sleep either in the *mantapam* opposite the *samadhi* or in the Draupadi Amman Temple in the forest. We would return to the ashram in the morning. In summer, when it was warmer, we used to sleep on the ground under peepul trees.

On some days there would be no food to eat but the very next day there would be an abundance. Irrespective of whether we were hungry or satiated, Sri Bhagavan maintained perfect equanimity.

He encouraged us to have the same attitude by saying,

'Whenever we do not get food, we should celebrate that day as *Ekadasi*, and when we get plenty of food, that day as *Dwadasi*'.[25]

Whenever there was a shortage of rice we used to go to the forest and collect a variety of green leaves. While we were cleaning them prior to cooking, Sri Bhagavan would explain the characteristics and medical properties of each one of them – for example, how one produced cold in the body while another produced heat. We used to fill a large vessel of cleaned greens and cook them in whatever way Sri Bhagavan suggested. At eating time Sri Bhagavan would ask us to have the dish of greens as the main dish and rice as the side dish. These meals, tasting like nectar, would fill us up completely. It is not known how Sri Bhagavan came to acquire his knowledge of the special qualities of various leaves. He came to Arunachala as a schoolboy and immediately engaged himself in intense *tapas*. It is therefore amazing how Sri Bhagavan, who did not take up any other activities after coming to Arunachala, came to know cooking, the stitching of leaf plates, the making of flower garlands, the preparation of pickles and many other activities. There was seemingly nothing that Sri Bhagavan, who was perfection itself, did not know how to do. Sometimes we used to bring leaves to make leaf plates. Echammal, her sister and a few others, who knew how to stitch them properly, used to stitch along with Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan would stitch the leaves more beautifully, more neatly and more quickly than those who were very experienced in the art. The leaves he stitched always appeared beautiful and perfect.[26] In those days if a devotee came from another town to Tiruvannamalai, he would offer *bhiksha* to Sri Bhagavan. At that time five rupees was enough to feed us all. The number of people staying in the ashram was not high, and the prices of various commodities were favourable. The devotee who offered the *bhiksha* would generally want to go round the hill with Sri Bhagavan the same evening. Sri Bhagavan always agreed to this. All of us would start and walk

[25] *Ekadasi* is the eleventh day of the waxing or waning moon. Many Hindus fast on that day. *Dwadasi*, the twelfth day, is when the fast is broken with sumptuous eating.

[26] Leaf plates are about a foot in diameter and are made of dried tree leaves, stapled together with short lengths of a tough dried grass. They are thrown away after one meal has been eaten off them.

very slowly, meditating and chanting on the way. By the time we had completed the *pradakshina* and returned to the ashram, morning would often have dawned. We never used to feel tired because we were immersed in the joy of having accompanied Sri Bhagavan around the hill. We devotees, who had walked all night, were able to take time off for a short nap in the afternoon, but Sri Bhagavan could never get any rest during the day because devotees would be continuously coming to see him. Usually, each afternoon another devotee would come, offer a *bhiksha* and ask that Sri Bhagavan accompany him around the hill that night. Sri Bhagavan would agree even if he had had no sleep the night before. He would indicate by a gesture that we should not tell the person concerned about his having gone around the hill the previous night. There were occasions when we could not sleep for two or three days because of continuous *bhikshas*, but for youngsters like us it was all great fun.

When he was asked how the lack of sleep for three successive nights affected him, he replied, 'What is sleep? It means resting the mind. But it is only if you have a mind that you need to rest it. However, to be awake all night will naturally bring eye strain and eye ache. But if you close the eyes and remain quiet for some time, the eye strain will go. That is all that is needed. So, where is the problem?'

One woman who took advantage of Sri Bhagavan's willingness to go round the hill after a *bhiksha* was Sundarambal, a local *sadhu*. Since she was a remarkable woman, I will tell her story in some detail.

She was tall and majestic, the daughter of a lawyer from Tiruvellore, which is near Madras. *Sadhus* often came to her house and even as a child she welcomed them. Once, a wandering monk, inspired by her devotion, taught her how to meditate on the *sushumna*. She practised with great enthusiasm and could sit for a long time, lost in total contemplation. When she grew up her family married her to a man in Madras, but whenever she went to her husband's house, she would start to develop a severe headache that would not respond to any treatment. When she went back to her father's house, the headaches would stop. They would only recur when she would attempt to re-enter the house of her husband. Her husband was a very understanding man. He sympathised with her plight and allowed her to stay permanently in her father's house. It was

clearly not her destiny to live a normal married life. Soon afterwards she entered a new phase of her spiritual growth when she found that the headaches occurred whenever she was not absorbed in meditation. Initially, it was only married life that gave her a headache. Now, everything in the world that was not connected with meditation brought on the same physical pain. The pain of normal consciousness and the desire for a contemplative life drove her to the point where she meditated all day.

After a few years she heard of Sri Bhagavan, came to see him, and found immediate peace and relief in his presence. Initially she stayed with Echammal, but later on she lived alone on the hill as a *sadhu*. As her hair became long and matted, she acquired the name 'Jatini Sundarambal'[27]

Though she lived some distance from the ashram, she came every day to have Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. On one occasion she fasted for twenty-one days and ended it by offering a *bhiksha* to Sri Bhagavan and the devotees. Afterwards, at her request, all of us, including Sri Bhagavan, went on a *giri pradakshina* with her. On the way round, Sundarambal described in detail the spiritual practices she was following, the problems she faced, and sought Sri Bhagavan's guidance for furthering her *sadhana*. By way of an answer, Sri Bhagavan asked me to tell her the story of Queen Chudala. This is a story that appears in *Yoga Vasishta*. I told it in great detail and with great enthusiasm. Many people were shy in the presence of Sri Bhagavan. They would stammer and stutter when they had to talk to him. I was never like that. I never felt uneasy if I had to speak in front of him. Like a child that displays its ability with enthusiasm and confidence when it is in front of its beloved mother, I always used to be happy and confident while reading *stotras* or talking about spiritual matters in front of Sri Bhagavan.

This is how I told the story:

'King Sikhidvaja and Queen Chudala ruled the kingdom of Malava. Chudala regularly practised meditation in the silent hours of the night. In due course she realised the Self, as a result of which her face shone brightly and she became much more beautiful than before. The king noticed this and asked the reason. The queen replied that it was due to her Self-

[27] '*Jatini*' means 'a woman with matted locks'.

realisation. The king laughed at her, thinking that realisation was possible only through severe austerities and could never be gained while living in a palace. He himself had religious inclinations and wanted to leave the kingdom to practise *tapas* in the forest so that he could gain Self-realisation. The queen tried to dissuade him and suggested that he could carry on the *tapas* in the palace itself and rule the kingdom as well. Refusing to act on her advice, he went to the forest and performed hard penance. The queen ruled the kingdom in the king's absence.

'The queen took pity on her husband. Being anxious to rescue him from the mire of delusion, she practised *siddhis* and took the guise of a *rishi* called Kumbha Muni. She then materialised before him a few feet off the ground. The king, thinking that some celestial being had descended from the heavens to bless him, fell at his feet, told him his woes and sought guidance.

'The *muni* gave the king the following advice: "Karmas [activities] can give fruit as ordained by the Lord, but karmas themselves cannot grant you liberation. By doing disinterested actions, one's mind can become pure. Then, with the pure mind, one should contemplate the Self. This will destroy the *vasanas*. Next, one should approach a Master and through his grace learn how to enquire into the nature of the Self. Liberation is possible only through enquiry and not by performing any amount of karma. By renouncing everything, one can realise the truth."

'The king said that he had renounced everything already, including his kingdom and family. Kumbha Muni told him that his renunciation was only external and that the seeds of attachment were still latent in him. The king then took his walking staff, his water pot, his *rudraksha* beads, his clothes, threw them all in the fire and stood naked without any possessions. On being told that he had still not renounced completely, the king was ready to drop his last possession, his body, by jumping from the top of a mountain.

'The *muni* asked him, "What harm has the body done to deserve this punishment?"

'By giving this answer the *muni* taught him that he could not realise the truth by destroying the body, but only by destroying the mind that was the source of all attachments. The mind identifies itself as "I" and this is the bondage. The snapping of this identification is the renunciation of everything. Having got

this far with his instructions, the *muni* then described in detail the *sadhana* of discrimination.

'After hearing all these words the king's doubts were dispelled and his mind became pure. The king took the advice to heart, enquired into the source of self, soon became one with it and remained in blissful *samadhi*.

'Kumbha Muni disappeared and returned sometime later, but the king was still in *samadhi*. Chudala roared like a lion to wake him up, but could not bring him out of his *samadhi* state. So, taking a more subtle form, she entered the king's heart and found it pure and devoid of any latent tendencies. In a melodious voice she began to chant the *Sama Veda*. Like the blossoming of a lotus, the king suddenly became aware of the world. Filled with joy, he remained silent, finding no words to express his gratitude. Then, as advised by the queen, he returned with her to the kingdom. Fully established in truth, he ruled the kingdom with the queen for many years.'

Sri Bhagavan was pleased with my narration. At its conclusion he said, appreciatively, 'Not bad! He narrates in such a way that it can be understood very well.'

As for Jatini Sundarambal, she had listened to my story with rapt attention. It had a profound effect on her and she left Arunachala soon afterwards. I had no doubt that the story and Sri Bhagavan's grace fully established her in the Self. What else could happen since Sri Bhagavan chose such a powerful story to be told to her?

Sri Bhagavan always spoke highly of *pradakshina* and encouraged many devotees to go as often as possible. The following story shows just how highly he regarded the practice. A Tiruvannamalai *sadhu* used to go round the hill every day, without fail, but other than that he did not do any meditation, *japa* or other practice. One day he asked Sri Bhagavan for a particular book, so Sri Bhagavan asked me to get it and give it to him. Later Sri Bhagavan asked me whether I had handed over the book.

I told him that I had and then asked Sri Bhagavan, 'That *sadhu* is not doing anything other than *pradakshina*. He does not seem to know about anything else. What does he want this book for?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'What is there superior to *pradakshina*? That alone is sufficient. Even if you sit and do *japa*, the mind

will wander, but if you do *pradakshina* the mind will remain one pointed even though the limbs and the body are moving. Doing *japa* or meditation with a one-pointed mind, while moving about, without having any thought other than the *japa*, is known as *sanchara samadhi* [absorption while moving]. That is why in the olden days pilgrimage on foot, without using any other conveyance, had so much importance.

'*Giri pradakshina* is unique. As there are many types of herbs on the hill, the breeze that blows over them is good for the body. Even today there are many *siddhas* and great souls on the hill. They too go around the hill, but we cannot see them. Because of this, when we do *pradakshina* we should keep to the left of the road. If we do this, we do *pradakshina* without causing any inconvenience to them. We also get the merit of walking round these great souls, thereby receiving their blessings. As we do *pradakshina*, the body becomes healthy and the mind attains the peace of the Self. Because of all these things, *pradakshina* is an extraordinary *sadhana*.'

In the course of his talk Sri Bhagavan also mentioned many other points that emphasised the greatness of *pradakshina*. I was extremely happy to hear from Sri Bhagavan himself about the greatness of *pradakshina*. From then on I felt enthusiastic about *pradakshina*, and the thought of going always filled me with joy.

After moving down the hill to Sri Ramanasramam, Sri Bhagavan continued to go for *pradakshina* for several years. On these occasions everyone would want to accompany him. This was not possible since someone had to stay behind to look after the ashram. We therefore had an arrangement whereby one or two of the cooks and one of the outdoor workers would stay behind. We instituted a rota so that those who had accompanied Sri Bhagavan on recent *pradakshinas* would stay back to give others a chance to go with him.

When we went for *pradakshina* with Sri Bhagavan on moonlit nights, we would eat snacks such as *pooris* before we left. We would then take some of this food with us to eat on the way. By the time we returned to the ashram, dawn would often be breaking.

In 1926 Narayana Rao was in charge of the kitchen. He was a majestic figure who had a good knowledge of English. He was also a boyhood friend of Chinnaswami.

If Chinnaswami ever criticized his cooking he would remember his old association with him and reply immediately and angrily, 'I am a *rayar* [a caste that has a reputation for producing skilled cooks]! Are you trying to teach me cooking?'

Once, when we were getting ready for *pradakshina*, Chinnaswami asked Narayana Rao to stay back and look after the ashram as it was his turn.

To this Narayana Rao replied, 'All of you stay with Sri Bhagavan all the time. I can only go with him after the kitchen work is over, so don't apply this notion of "turn" to me. I am also going for *pradakshina*!'

Because he insisted on going for *pradakshina*, there was a heated argument between him and Chinnaswami at the end of which Narayana Rao said, 'If you make me stay here, I will leave the ashram'.

Chinnaswami retorted, 'If you don't like it here, you can leave!'

News of this quarrel had reached Sri Bhagavan's ears. When we were all ready we told Sri Bhagavan that we could start.

He kept quiet for some time and then said, 'All of you go'.

Puzzled by his reply, we told him, 'Food has been packed and kept ready'.

Sri Bhagavan responded by saying, 'You can eat all that food when you come back from *pradakshina*'.

As we all stood there looking stunned, Sri Bhagavan said calmly but firmly, 'Because disputes such as "I will go with him" or "You will go with him" only arise because I go round the hill, you can all go and come back without me'.

Sri Bhagavan never went round the hill again.

In the period when Sri Bhagavan was still going round the hill, he would often feel tired and weak after he had returned from his walk. Some devotees saw this and felt that it would be good if Sri Bhagavan stopped doing *pradakshina*. The heartfelt desire of those devotees came to be fulfilled when Sri Bhagavan came to hear that the devotees were quarrelling among themselves over who should accompany him.

Narayana Rao felt very sad that he had been responsible for Sri Bhagavan's decision to stop going for *pradakshina*. He left the ashram a few months later and went to stay at Pavalakundru, but he still came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* quite frequently.

It is inevitable, I suppose, that in an ashram some people will end up quarrelling with others. It is also inevitable that outsiders

will find some pretext to quarrel with the ashram. Sri Bhagavan taught us all to stay away from disputes that were none of our business, and in particular, to avoid taking an interest in matters that were solely the concern of the ashram management.

Once, for example, some awkward problems concerning the ashram management cropped up. Without being directly concerned, I was worried about them, as I felt that failure to solve them satisfactorily would impair the good name of the ashram. One day two or three devotees went to Sri Bhagavan and put some of these problems before him. I happened to enter the hall while they were talking about them, and he immediately turned to me and asked me why I had come in at this time and why I was interesting myself in such matters. I did not grasp the meaning of the question, so Sri Bhagavan explained that a person should occupy himself only with that purpose with which he had originally come to the ashram. He asked me what my original purpose had been.

'To receive Sri Bhagavan's grace,' I replied.

'Then occupy yourself with that alone,' he said.

After a pause he continued by asking me whether I had any interest in matters concerning the ashram management when I first arrived. I told him that I had not.

'Then,' he said, 'concentrate on the original purpose of your coming here.'

* * *

Sri Bhagavan often used to say that going for *bhiksha* [begging for food] was good for *sadhana*, that it would destroy the ego and remove the I-am-the-body idea. During the early days of our stay at Sri Ramanasramam, Ramakrishna Swami wanted to live on *bhiksha*. After taking Sri Bhagavan's permission, he stayed at Virupaksha Cave and went each day to town for *bhiksha*.

As he walked along the street, he would shout *'Bhiksha! Bhiksha!'* Because his call was strident, like the shouts of a hawker, some of the local boys made fun of him by asking, 'How many *bhikshas* for a rupee?'

Following Sri Bhagavan's advice that he should go to a different street every day, he begged in several different streets on two or three successive days.

On the fourth day he went down a new street and shouted

'*Bhiksha! Bhiksha!*' in the usual way. A devotee called Lakshmi Amma, who lived in that street, recognised him as an ashramite and insisted on his having *bhiksha* in her house. She took him inside, washed his feet, put down a leaf-plate and served food on it. She then asked him to recite the *Siva Puranam* [the introductory portion of the *Tiruvachakam*]. As he did not know that particular work, he just sat there without saying anything. When Lakshmi Amma realised that he didn't know what to do, she herself repeated the *Siva Puranam* and also a song from the *Periyapuranam*. She waved lighted camphor before him, prostrated to him and requested him to eat. Ramakrishna Swami felt ashamed and regretted his ignorance of what appeared to be a traditional ceremony for begging *sadhus*. Feeling that his attempts at going for *bhiksha* were enough, he returned to the ashram.

When Sri Bhagavan came to hear this story he laughed and said, 'What to do? If one goes for *bhiksha* because of poverty one will have to go grovelling and with some hesitation. But what is he [Ramakrishna Swami]? Does he not have money of his own? Does he not have enough to buy food? After all, he only went for *bhiksha* for the sake of following a tradition. That is why he shouted "*Bhiksha!*" in such a majestic and dignified manner. At the time when I went out for *bhiksha*, I too would go in a dignified manner, and with indifference. It is something that comes naturally to one.'

Then he added, 'Those who are begging *sadhus* should know the *Siva Puranam* and songs from the *Periyapuranam*. When one goes for *bhiksha*, or when one goes to eat in a *math*, one should recite both of these works before taking food. In North India the works are different. There, before eating, one must recite the fifteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Siva Mahimna Stotra*, but here in the South it is not necessary for everyone to know them.'

After hearing Sri Bhagavan say this, I learned the *Siva Puranam*, some songs from *Periyapuranam*, some verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* and a few other songs. If there was any function in any *math* or ashram, Sri Bhagavan would ask me to go and attend as the ashram's representative. With a confidence born out of knowing the tradition, I would happily go.

This Lakshmi Amma, the one who gave *bhiksha* to

Ramakrishna Swami, had great devotion to Sri Bhagavan. On auspicious days such as new-moon day, Karttikai and the first day of the Tamil month, she would have her bath early in the morning and start for *pradakshina* with her only son, who was then about eight years old. On the way round the hill, at about 5 a.m., she would come to the ashram.

On seeing them both Sri Bhagavan would remark, 'Oh, is today Karttikai? Or is it the first day of the month? It is only when I see these two that I am aware of auspicious days.'

Lakshmi Amma would usually ask her son Ramachandran to recite the *Dakshinamurti Stotra* before Sri Bhagavan. As the boy could not, at the end of each verse, recollect the first words of the succeeding one, Sri Bhagavan would guide him by telling him the first word each time he began a new stanza. Sri Bhagavan has translated this particular work into Tamil. Specifically for the sake of the boy Ramachandran, he put together the first words of all the verses and made them into a small poem.

Though Ramakrishna Swami and I were both serving as Sri Bhagavan's personal attendant, the workload was not sufficient to engage the two of us. As we felt that it was not proper to eat food in the Guru's presence without doing any work, we decided that one of us should go for *bhiksha* each day and do *tapas* at some place away from the ashram.[28]

Ramakrishna Swami's brother was sending him Rs 25 every month, which in those days was a very large sum. There was a woman called Sowbhagyattamma who lived in the town and fed *sadhus* there. It cost her Rs 5 a month to feed each *sadhu*. Her whole life revolved around feeding *sadhus* and having Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. When it was my turn to stay outside the ashram, Ramakrishna Swami used to give Rs 5 to Sowbhaghyattamma and ask her to feed me. He had a similar arrangement with her when it was his turn to stay outside the ashram. Neither of us would eat any food either in the morning or at night. We only took the lunch that was supplied by this woman. The food used to be sent to Virupaksha Cave, which is where we both stayed when we lived outside the ashram.

[28] Though Kunju Swami speaks of 'going for *bhiksha*', he told me, during the course of a conversation I had with him, that he never went out begging himself.

Ramakrishna Swami once went to Virupaksha Cave when it was his turn to stay outside the ashram. He was planning to do *tapas* there. On his fourth day, while he was meditating, he had a vision of a great effulgent light. He was both thrilled and surprised. Then, when he wondered whether he could see the town of Kumbakonam in this great effulgence, Kumbakonam appeared. Having seen the town, he then wondered whether he could see the Sri Ramanasramam that had been founded there. That too became visible.

In delight he exclaimed to himself, 'Aha! Lord Arunachala has blessed me with the vision of effulgence very quickly! In addition, I can also see anything I think of.'

Thinking in this vein, and feeling very pleased with himself, he returned to Sri Ramanasramam where he repeatedly and joyfully narrated his experience to us all.

But when Sri Bhagavan was told about the vision, he remarked, 'Oho! Is this *tapas*? This is splendid indeed! He went for *tapas*. Kumbakonam appeared and the ashram there appeared. What great *tapas* this is! To subside at the source of the mind and abide there as the Self – this alone is *tapas*. Instead, he says, "I saw this, I did this". Such states are not permanent.'

Sri Bhagavan subsequently expressed similar sentiments in verse thirty of *Upadesa Undiyar*:

> If one knows That [Self] which remains after 'I' has ceased to exist, that is excellent *tapas*. So said Lord Ramana, who is the Self.

In the presence of Sri Bhagavan we were always happy and blissful. To us young *brahmacharis* [celibate *sadhus*] all activities were sports. Fasting, doing *tapas* alone, remaining as though the body were dead, going round the hill twice or even three times a day, sleeping on the bare floor without any bedding – all these acts were our sports. An incident that took place at Skandashram illustrates the sort of antics we got up to.

After Sri Bhagavan left Skandashram and started staying permanently at Sri Ramanasramam, a priest of the Arunachaleswara Temple, Vriddhachalam, stayed at Skandashram. He was a devotee of the Goddess Raja Rajeswari, and he also knew the medicinal properties of the various herbs that grew on the hill. At Skandashram he would drink the juice

of one particular herb as a purgative. On the following day he would take a tumblerful of juice from another herb. He would then go and sit inside the small room and ask me to lock the room from outside. I was his confidant in such matters. After a week I would open the room, shake him and wake him up from the trance the herbs had put him into. We went through this routine several times. He showed me the particular herbs he was using, but as I was not interested in following such methods, I immediately forgot about them.

One day this priest and I decided to take a vow to remain continuously without sleep for eight days. I asked Ramakrishna Swami to attend to Sri Bhagavan's personal needs during this period because I was planning to stay at Skandashram with the priest. During the day the priest and I took nothing but tea. We passed the time by engaging ourselves in meditation and study. At about 10 p.m. we used to walk slowly down from Skandashram and would reach the ashram below at around midnight. In those days Sri Bhagavan used to come out at that time. After spending a long time in Sri Bhagavan's presence, we would return to Skandashram early in the morning. On the fifth day we found that we could not manage without sleep any longer. It is possible to go without food for any number of days, but it is impossible to avoid sleep altogether. We paid our usual visit to Sri Ramanasramam on the night of the fifth day.

Seeing our tired look, Sri Bhagavan said, 'Enough! Enough of your vows and other mischiefs. There is some *aviyal* [a mixture of cooked vegetables] and rice. Go and eat.'

Realising that we could not continue any more, we ate. Our vow ended that night. Once again I resumed my work as a personal attendant to Sri Bhagavan.

Some days later I started on a pilgrimage to Kovilur Math. Sri Mahadeva Swami, who was then the head of the Kovilur Math, had previously been the head of the Isanya Math at Tiruvannamalai. When he had lived in Tiruvannamalai, he used to come frequently for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. On these occasions he would speak to us all with great affection. When he had lived in Tiruvannamalai, every Deepavali day, he would send Sri Bhagavan a bottle of oil, some soapnut powder and a new loincloth. Even after leaving Tiruvannamalai he arranged through his successor, Sri Natesa Swami, that these offerings should continue. Sri Mahadeva Swami also contributed money

for the construction of Skandashram. The members of his head *math* initially objected, saying that the money from the *math* could not be given for purposes unconnected with their own *math*.

He responded to their complaint by saying, 'We and our *math* are subjected to certain regulations. But Sri Bhagavan and his state are so supreme, they cannot be bound by anything. Indeed, it is our good fortune that we are able to serve such a great one. If it is not proper to give money from the *math*, I shall give my own personal money.'

Such was his devotion to Sri Bhagavan.

After spending a few days at Kovilur Math, I returned to Sri Ramanasramam. Whenever I returned after visiting a place, Sri Bhagavan would ask me in detail about my visit.

He enquired about my trip to Kovilur Math and I told him, 'Sri Mahadeva Swami enquired about Sri Bhagavan's well being and about the ashramites with great love. On the day of my visit Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar also came with his associates.'

'What did Chettiar do?' asked Sri Bhagavan.

I replied, 'He tied his upper cloth round his waist and with great humility did *ashtanga namaskaram* [an elaborate full-length prostration] to Mahadeva Swami and received *vibhuti* from him.'

Then Sri Bhagavan asked, 'Did you do *namaskar*?'

'No,' I replied, somewhat hesitatingly.

When Sri Bhagavan asked me why not, I explained my attitude to him: 'After obtaining the good fortune of prostrating to Sri Bhagavan, how can I prostrate to anyone else?'

Sri Bhagavan looked at me and said, 'Aha! You are the one who knows Bhagavan well. You are a very wise man! Is your Bhagavan only this five-feet-long body on the sofa? Is he only inside this building and not anywhere else? One who has such *ekabhakti* [single-minded devotion] should not travel elsewhere. If one goes to other places, one must behave by observing the traditions of those places. Wherever and whomever one prostrates to, if one does it either meditating on the Guru or on one's chosen deity, the prostration will reach them. This is the only proper way.'

I realised my mistake. From then on, whenever I happened to prostrate to someone, I always thought of Sri Bhagavan.

People who were devoted to other gods and gurus would

often come to see Sri Bhagavan and prostrate before him. Because of their faith or because of Sri Bhagavan's power, they would often see in him an image of their own particular Master or deity. Tiruppugazh Alamelu Amma, for example, a woman from Madurai, was devoted to Lord Subramaniam alone. She would accept no one else as her Master and she had decided that no one else should appear before her as her Guru. As she was always singing the *Tiruppugazh*[29] she came to be known as 'Tiruppugazh' Alamelu Amma. She was a native of Madurai and only came to Tiruvannamalai when her father was given the job of Deputy Collector there. Her father had had Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* and was quite impressed, but when he invited his daughter to come on his next visit to Sri Bhagavan, she declined. That night she dreamt of Sri Bhagavan. In her dream the form of Sri Bhagavan disappeared and in its place she saw the form of Lord Subramaniam. As a result of this experience, she went to see Sri Bhagavan on the following day and sat before him. Initially she saw only the holy form of Sri Bhagavan, but as she continued to gaze at him, she saw him as Lord Subramaniam and surrendered totally to him.

After this experience she used to come for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* quite frequently. On these visits she liked to sing *Aksharamanamalai* in front of him. When she reached verse forty-four, instead of singing in the usual way:

> O my Arunachala! You said, 'Turning back, daily see the "I" with the inner eye. It will then be known.'

She would alter the pronunciation a little and sing:

> O my Arunachala! You said, 'Daily see with the inner eye the Kanda who returned. It will then be known.'[30]

Sri Bhagavan generally did not say anything good or bad about anyone, but if he happened to hear about the demise of anyone he knew, he would immediately tell those around him

[29] *Tiruppugazh* is a collection of poems in praise of Subramaniam. They were all written about five hundred years ago by Arunagirinatha, Tiruvannamalai's most famous saint prior to the arrival of Ramana Maharshi.

[30] The two Tamil words *tirumbi ahantanai* can also be pronounced *tirumbia kandanai* to give the second interpretation. Kanda is another name of Subramaniam.

about the good qualities of the departed person. We were often surprised by how much he knew about the life and activities of the many people who came to see him. We would also sometimes wonder how he acquired obscure bits of information that were unknown even to us. Then, when we heard him speak, we would often be surprised to learn that the deceased had had such good qualities. We all wanted to have the good fortune of being praised by Sri Bhagavan after our deaths, but of course, only those who died during his lifetime had this privilege.

Whenever we heard that someone had died, we would make a point of going to sit before Sri Bhagavan because we were all keen to hear Sri Bhagavan compliment the departed person. Even when he talked about people who were, to the rest of us, inveterate scoundrels, he would always find something good to say about them.

There was a rich man called Kandaswami who lived in town. Although he occasionally used to come to the ashram for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, the local people detested him because of his bad behaviour. During his last days, which he spent in the *mantapam* opposite the ashram, he suffered from both poverty and disease. While he was lying in this *mantapam*, he sent word through a messenger that he would like some gruel prepared in the Malayalam way. Immediately Sri Bhagavan arranged for this gruel to be prepared and sent to him. On the following day Kandaswami's condition became serious, so serious in fact that we were speaking among ourselves, wondering which of his good qualities Sri Bhagavan would speak about when he passed away. A day later, Kandaswami died.

We immediately went and informed Sri Bhagavan and sat before him, thinking that even Sri Bhagavan would not be able to think of anything good to say about this man. What a disappointment!

Sri Bhagavan told us, 'No one could keep his body and clothes as clean as Kandaswami. He used neither oil nor soap. He would come at 8 a.m. in the morning and start washing his *dhoti*. Then he would hang it up to dry. By the time he had completed his bath it would be twelve noon. His hair and beard were always extremely clean.'

We hung our heads in shame. Who could equal Sri Bhagavan in seeing only the good qualities in all people?

Sri Bhagavan used to go to the kitchen at 4 a.m. to start

cutting the vegetables. One or two of us would join him and help. Sometimes the amount of vegetables to be prepared used to startle us. Sri Bhagavan managed to cut much more and more quickly than the rest of us. One time, faced with a mountain of work, I looked up at the clock because I was impatient to finish the job. Actually, I wanted to go back to sleep and have another short nap.

Sri Bhagavan sensed my impatience and asked, 'Why are you looking at the clock?'

I tried to bluff him by saying, 'If I could only complete the work before five, I could go and meditate for an hour'.

Sri Bhagavan retorted, 'The allotted work has to be completed in time. Other thoughts are obstacles, not the amount of work. Doing the allotted work in time is itself meditation. Go ahead and do the job with full attention.'

In this way Sri Bhagavan taught us the importance of right, honest work.

In the ashram kitchen only brahmins were allowed to cook. That was because brahmins will not eat food that has been cooked by non-brahmins. Sri Bhagavan approved of this arrangement, not because he approved of religious orthodoxy in general, but because he didn't want to cause offence to the many brahmins who stayed in the ashram. Mostly Sri Bhagavan went along with orthodox dietary practices, but sometimes he was willing to bend the rules a little so long as no one found out or took offence. This can be seen from the following story.

When Sri Bhagavan was still living at Skandashram, Echammal, a brahmin devotee, used to feed him daily. She also took brahmin *sannyasins* into her home and gave them *bhiksha* in the traditional way.

Two disciples of Narayana Guru, Govindananda Giri and Achyutananda Giri, once came to visit from Kanchipuram. After staying a few days in the town, the two came to live with Sri Bhagavan. They were both well-built, fair-complexioned and learned. Taking them to be brahmins, Echammal invited them to her house. Neither party informed Sri Bhagavan about this arrangement.[31]

[31] Narayana Guru, in addition to being a spiritual teacher, campaigned actively for the uplift and emancipation of outcastes. He took outcaste boys, brought them up, taught them Sanskrit and

On the day that they had to go for *bhiksha,* Govindananda and Achyutananda informed Sri Bhagavan of the invitation. Sri Bhagavan immediately realised that there might be a problem. If Echammal discovered that they were non-brahmins, she might withdraw her hospitality. This would be a great embarrassment to the *sannyasins.*

To warn them indirectly, Sri Bhagavan asked with a smile, 'Do you know how to do *parishechanam*?'[32]

Govindananda and Achyutananda were quick to take the hint.

They answered, 'Yes Bhagavan. We observed this practice in North India where *sannyasins* do *parishechanam* before eating.'

The meal went off without incident. Sri Bhagavan kept from Echammal all her life this secret of the non-brahmin *sannyasins* to whom she had offered *bhiksha* in her house.

In contrast to this there were occasions when he sided with the ultra-orthodox. When the ashram *Veda Patasala* was started in 1938, Sri Krishna Ganapatigal was appointed as its teacher. He was very orthodox. In the dining room at that time it was the practice to serve the brahmins first. Only afterwards would Sri Bhagavan and the non-brahmins be served. Once the food had been served to the non-brahmins from the serving bucket, an orthodox brahmin would consider the remaining food in the bucket to be polluted. Such a person would not therefore take a second helping from the same source. Sri Krishna Ganapatigal was very unhappy about the ashram's serving methods because he could not ask for extra food when he wanted some. He went to Sri Bhagavan and explained the problem. Sri Bhagavan accepted it as a valid complaint and made arrangements for Ganapatigal to eat separately in the kitchen. Not only that, he made a point of enquiring before he entered the dining room whether the *patasala* teacher had been fed properly. This went on for several days until Sri Bhagavan was satisfied that the arrangements were in place and would be permanent.[33]

Sri Bhagavan enjoyed his work in the kitchen. He worked

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educated them in *Veda patasalas,* which he founded. At the end of their schooling, the lighter-skinned graduates were indistinguishable from brahmin boys who had attended their own *patasalas.*

[32] A brahmin ritual of drawing three circles around the leaf plate with water before touching the food.

[33] In the *Moments Remembered* account from which these two

thoroughly and painstakingly and expected everyone else to do the same. The way he prepared a humble vegetable such as spinach was an object lesson in patience, economy and the culinary art.

Early in the morning Sri Bhagavan would go to the kitchen to tackle the heaps of spinach that had been assembled there. We would all follow him. His instructions for cutting were quite specific:

'The spinach should be cut into three parts. First the top, the leaves; second, the stem, and third, the root. The leaves are to be used for making curry. The stems are to be bundled together and tied. These are to be put into the boiling *sambar* and removed before serving. The roots are be cleaned a number of times in water and then crushed three or four times on the grinding stone, each time taking the juice out until only the pure fibre is left. This juice is to be mixed with the *rasam*.'

This was the regular routine for cooking spinach. It meant a lot of work and Sri Bhagavan often ended up doing most of it himself.

Once, to save ourselves a lot of work, we took all the roots, bundled them up and buried them in the ground in a place that Sri Bhagavan did not usually frequent while he was out walking. That day, of course, Sri Bhagavan did deviate from his usual route and passed by that very spot. Seeing the earth freshly

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'orthodoxy' stories are taken, Kunju Swami confesses that he could never make up his mind whether Bhagavan supported or opposed dietary orthodoxy. The question has been extensively debated in the Ramana literature. See 'Bhagavan the Atiasrami' (*The Mountain Path* 1991, pp. 112–21) and the references given in its footnotes for further details. Personally, I find no inconsistency in Bhagavan's behaviour. The following dietary rules that seemed to be in operation at the ashram do not seem to me to be mutually contradictory:

1 All food served in the ashram must be vegetarian.

2 Bhagavan was willing to bend the rules of orthodoxy on special occasions so long as no one who might take offence found out.

3 Indian visitors were expected to follow the same dietary regimes in the ashram that they followed in their own homes. If they observed strict brahmin rules at home, they were expected to continue observing them in the ashram.

4 Visitors who required special food or eating facilities because of their religious beliefs or health problems were always given them.

disturbed, he put his walking stick into it to investigate and some spinach roots surfaced.

Sri Bhagavan immediately knew what had happened. He sat down, dug out all the roots himself and began to clean them. Since the roots were all now covered with fresh mud, it took him a long time. After washing them, he went to the kitchen, crushed them repeatedly in the grinding stone till all the juice had been extracted. He himself put the juice into the *rasam* and only then did he continue with his walk. Sri Bhagavan did all this with a smile on his face, without a trace of irritation or anger. It was an object lesson for all of us who silently witnessed him with untold feelings of guilt. That lesson was imprinted on our hearts so deeply that never afterwards did we think of idling or wasting anything.

I once went to Sri Santhalinga Math at Peraiyur, near Coimbatore, for the *kumbhabhishekam* of the Peraiyur Temple, which was being performed by the Nattukottai Chettiars. At their invitation, *sadhus* from Kovilur Math, Sadhu Swami and his group from Palani, and other learned *sadhus* had come and were staying in the *math*. Some of them were known to me since they had previously come to have Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. After the *kumbhabhishekam* we had our meal and then started conversing. The *sadhus* who had known me earlier introduced me to the other *sadhus*, saying that I had come from Sri Ramanasramam.

On hearing this, the other *sadhus* said, 'Since we have all come together, let us discuss something'.

They first asked me to explain *akhandakara vritti* [unbroken experience]. As I could remember clearly the explanation Sri Bhagavan had given when devotees raised this question in his presence, I quoted the appropriate verse from *Ribhu Gita* and explained it. Then the *sadhus* asked me about *pratibhanda* [the three obstacles: ignorance, doubt and wrong knowledge]. This too I explained with a verse from *Vedanta Chudamani*. The *sadhus* were pleased with my explanation.

It occurred to me that I should know about the vedantic texts that were studied in the *maths*. I did not want to embarrass the ashram by being unable to discuss these matters when I was sent out by them as a representative. Sri Krishnananda Swami, who is presently the head of the Tirukhalar Math, and who was my boyhood friend, had also come to attend the

kumbhabhishekam. He had taken lessons in Vedanta from Mahadeva Swami, the head of Kovilur Math. When I informed him of my intention, he said that sixteen texts, selected by Sri Narasimha Bharati Swamigal of Sringeri Math, were taken up for study. This swami had insisted that vedantins should not read secular literature and polemics.

My friend estimated that it would take many years for one to learn these texts in the proper way, so I asked him, 'I want to learn all these texts, but not in the traditional way. I will read them by myself. It will be enough if you explain the portions I cannot follow. Is it then possible to learn their meaning within two months?'

Seeing my keenness he replied, 'We will try to complete them all in three months. You must come to Tirukhalar, though, to study them'.

After telling my friend that I would come to study with him as soon as I could, I returned to Sri Ramanasramam.

A few days after my return to the ashram I told Sri Bhagavan about the events that had taken place in Peraiyur.

I concluded: 'When people from other *maths* who have studied Vedanta find out that I have come from Sri Ramanasramam, they start asking me philosophical questions. I feel that if I do not give fitting answers to their questions, it will reflect badly on our ashram. Because of this I asked Sri Krishnananda of Tirukhalar to give me lessons on Vedanta. He has asked me to come to Tirukhalar and he has agreed to give me lessons on Vedanta, and to complete them as early as possible. I am now thinking of going to Tirukhalar to learn Vedanta.'

Sri Bhagavan replied with a mocking smile, 'Now you are going to study Vedanta, then it will be *Siddhanta*, then Sanskrit, and then polemics.'

As he kept adding more and more subjects, I stood before him dumbfounded.

Seeing my depressed look Sri Bhagavan said, 'It is enough if you study the One'.

He could see that his answer had puzzled me, so he added, with some compassion, 'If you learn to remain within your Self as the Self, that will amount to learning everything. What Vedanta lessons did I take? If you remain as the Self, the echo

from the Heart will be from experience. It will be in agreement with the scriptures. This is what is called "the divine voice".'

On hearing Sri Bhagavan's words, the desire to learn Vedanta in order to answer the questions of others left me for good. From that day onwards, if someone asked me questions related to Vedanta, I was able, through Sri Bhagavan's grace, to get the appropriate answer from within. As Sri Bhagavan himself has written in *Atma Vidya Kirtanam*, verse three:

> Without knowing the Self, what is the use if one knows anything else? If one has known the Self, what else is there to know? When that Self that shines without differences in different living beings is known within oneself, the light of Self will flash forth. It is the shining forth of grace, the destruction of 'I' and the blossoming of bliss.

Though Sri Bhagavan discouraged most of us from studying Vedanta in a formal way, he himself was a pandit *par excellence*. He knew all the great scriptural works and could, when the occasion demanded it, cite from them or comment on them with fluent ease. *Jnana Vasishtam*, a great philosophical work in Tamil, was one of the works that was often referred to and cited by Sri Bhagavan. It is a selection of verses dealing exclusively with the path of Self-knowledge, and it is a translation of the great Sanskrit work, *Yoga Vasishta*. In the early twenties Sri Bhagavan was going through it and in the process started correcting some of the printing errors. One chapter deals with the story of how King Janaka attained enlightenment after listening to the conversations of some *siddhas*. The conversation in the original Sanskrit covered six verses, but only five were found by Sri Bhagavan in the Tamil book. Sri Bhagavan translated the omitted verse into Tamil and added it to the margin of the book along with the Sanskrit original. It is this verse that can be found as the benedictory stanza of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham* [the *Supplement to Forty Verses* in Sri Bhagavan's *Collected Works*]. Here are the six verses. The third is the one that Sri Bhagavan translated and used as a benedictory verse:

1 When the knower and the known become one, then the bliss of the Self is experienced. This is known as

Self-knowledge, and this is what one should aim at.

2 To eradicate the *vasanas* one should contemplate on the Self which bestows light on the seer, the seen and the act of seeing. One should thus contemplate on the eternal Self, which is the centre between being and non-being.

3 That in which all these worlds seem to exist steadily, that of which all these worlds are a possession, that from which all these worlds arise, that for which all these exist, that by which all these worlds come into existence and that which indeed is all these – that alone is the existing reality. Let us cherish that Self, which is the Reality, in the Heart.

4 One should contemplate the one eternal Self that reveals itself shining as 'I-I'. Instead of seeking the truth in the Heart, the ignorant one goes in search of God outside himself. This is like a man throwing away the valuable *kaustubha* gem that he has in his hand and going after conch shells.

5 The Self can be realised only by those who have completely destroyed the hosts of desires. One should know that there is no happiness in the trouble-causing objects of both the past and the future. But if one clings to them, one will remain in bondage and will be no better than an ass.

6 Just as the celestial Indra struck down the mountains with his thunderbolt, let us strike at the senses, which raise their hoods as hissing snakes, with our powerful discriminative mind. By this the mind acquires peace, gets equanimity and becomes one with the blissful Self.

Sri Bhagavan told us the story of what happened next on several occasions. This is how he narrated it to us:

'King Janaka, who was pure and ripe, overheard this teaching. On hearing the truth revealed in these verses by the *siddhas*, he became so detached, he lost all interest in the relative world. He left the affairs of his kingdom to his wise ministers and returned to his private apartments. Left alone, he followed the

advice of the *siddhas* and contemplated one-pointedly on the truth. When he finally got the experience, these were his comments:

'"With the destruction of *sankalpa* [will or intention], the mind will also be destroyed. When the root of the mind, which is the cause of trouble, is destroyed, the tree of birth and death will also be terminated. I have detected the thief who robbed me of the jewel that is my Self! His name is mind. I have been suffering for so long on account of this villain. I will now hang him and make him die.

'"Till now, I have not been able to bore a hole in the pearl of mind. Now I will do so. I will make a rosary of it by stringing it on the thread of experience and wear it on my person."

'In this way the ripe mind of the king became introverted and merged with the Self. He remained in *samadhi* for a long time. In due course, when he came back to the relative plane, he realised that the Self was the substratum of all. Rooted in this consciousness, the Self, he resumed ruling his kingdom, his mind remaining totally detached from the consequences of all pairs of opposites such as pain and pleasure.'

Sri Bhagavan advises us to 'be still', to control the impulses of the mind and to rest in the Self, the knowledge of which transcends and even invalidates all other forms of knowledge. The silent grace of Sri Bhagavan enabled devotees to reach and discover this transcendental experience for themselves. It is a well-known fact that all those who came to Sri Bhagavan, irrespective of whether they were scholars or illiterates, got rid of their ignorance, egoism and anxieties and obtained peace through his gracious look.

One man who discovered this for himself was a pandit from North India who came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* and stayed in the ashram for some days. Initially he sat before Sri Bhagavan and continuously read aloud verses from the *Upanishads* and other Sanskrit works. This proved to be a great inconvenience for the rest of us as we could neither speak to Sri Bhagavan nor meditate. As Sri Bhagavan had decided to listen to all his recitations very patiently, we could not say anything. Ten days passed in this way. One morning, the place near Sri Bhagavan where the pandit normally sat was vacant. The pandit was sitting quietly in a distant corner and the hall was immersed in silence.

Noticing my surprise Sri Bhagavan laughed and said in Malayalam [a language the pandit could not understand], 'The pandit too has now become like us'.

Without spiritual experience and with mere book knowledge it is not possible to redeem either oneself or others. After emptying himself and his book knowledge into Sri Bhagavan, the sun of knowledge, the pandit became quiet.

Sri Bhagavan had no patience with devotees who were over-solicitous about his bodily needs and physical welfare. He used to tolerate a certain amount of zeal in strangers and devotees who were comparative newcomers, but he was severe with the older devotees who tried to pay special attention to him even in ordinary matters. He generally showed his displeasure by a stern silence, but at times he would also strongly rebuke the erring devotee and make him feel thoroughly ashamed of himself. In my younger days I once happened to incur his displeasure trying to save him from some bodily exertion that I thought was too much for him. He taught me a severe lesson that I still remember.

It happened in the 1920s at a time when the kitchen work was supervised by Dandapani Swami. Every day he used to make various kinds of chutney. Sri Bhagavan and he would work together on this. One of them would do the grinding on the stone mortar while the other one pushed in the ingredients. In those days, because there were only seven or eight permanent inmates in the ashram, Sri Bhagavan would frequently join us in the cutting and grinding work. Since Dandapani Swami was a brahmin, he would not allow any of us non-brahmins to do the grinding work. This meant that Sri Bhagavan had to do this heavy work almost every day. After some time Bhagavan developed blisters on his right index finger because of all the grinding work he was doing. Ramakrishna Swami and I were very disturbed when we saw this. We informed Dandapani Swami about Sri Bhagavan's blisters and asked him to discontinue, temporarily, the preparation of any chutney that involved grinding work.

He ignored our request so I went to Sri Bhagavan and told him in private, with great anguish, 'Bhagavan, you have blisters on your hand. From now on, please do not do any grinding work. It will be highly improper on our part to allow you to work like this. If you carry on, I won't eat anything prepared by you in this way.'

On the following day Dandapani Swami brought a lot of sour greens to the kitchen and arranged for the preparation of chutney. None of us volunteered to clean them prior to grinding. Since Sri Bhagavan did the grinding that day, I kept my promise and refused to take any chutney with my food. Someone informed Sri Bhagavan about this.

Just before the next meal Sri Bhagavan sent for me and asked. 'May I eat?'

I stood there perplexed.

Then Sri Bhagavan made fun of me, saying, 'If I don't obey the devotees, they won't eat. I have to act in accordance with their commands. When they come here, initially everyone is a *sadhu*. But as the days pass, they start giving orders even to me because they feel that Swami must obey whatever they say.'

I was shocked by his words but he gave me no chance to recover.

For the next three days he taunted me by asking my permission to do even the simplest thing: 'Can I have my bath? Can I eat? Can I go out to the toilet?'

After a few days I found that I could not bear his derisive remarks any more. I told Ramakrishna Swami about my mental anguish. Thinking that a change of scenery would bring about the required peace of mind, I told him I had a plan to go to Tirupati on the 6.30 p.m. train and that I would return after spending a few days there. I also mentioned my plan to Sri Bhagavan and got his permission to go.

That afternoon, a little after 3 p.m., Sri Bhagavan suddenly decided that he would go on a *giri pradakshina*. Ramakrishna Swami suggested that I accompany Sri Bhagavan and catch my train on the way through town. Since I thought it was a good idea, I took a *dhoti* and some other items for my trip and went with Sri Bhagavan and the others on *pradakshina*. On that particular day Sri Bhagavan started walking extremely slowly. As it would have been improper for me to go ahead of Sri Bhagavan, I too had to walk slowly. The 6.30 train left as we passed Kubera Lingam.

As he watched it go, Sri Bhagavan laughed and said, 'See, there goes your train! Quickly fly to it! Fly!'

All the others joined in his laughter but I was speechless. Later that evening we reached the ashram.

After we had eaten our supper, Dandapani Swami told Sri

Bhagavan, 'It seems that he said that you should not grind chutney. Because of that remark you said that from now on everything should be done according to his orders. So, feeling that he might be rid of the mental agony if he went somewhere else, he started for Tirupati. He is now sorry that he behaved in a way that made Sri Bhagavan angry. He is now asking to be forgiven.'

Sri Bhagavan immediately answered, 'What anger do I have towards him? What wrong has he done? As he was unable to bear seeing the blisters on my hand, he refused to eat the chutney ground by me. What is there in this to get angry about? He thought that I got angry and so he wanted to go to Tirupati. What an intelligent fellow! Here he finds even the ashram food unappetising. He adds water to the *sambar* and *rasam* and swallows them as though they were medicine. What kind of food will he get elsewhere? Moreover, the man who taught him during his early days in Kerala put his hands in mine and asked me to look after him carefully. Before leaving, he handed him over to me. If tomorrow he came back and asked me, "Where is my disciple?" is it not I who will have to answer for him?'

Sri Bhagavan laughed and concluded, 'And now this fellow wants to go to Tirupati!'

I felt very consoled and happy when I heard Sri Bhagavan speak like this. Was not all this a drama enacted by Sri Bhagavan himself to remove my egotistical thought, 'I am doing personal service to Sri Bhagavan. Only I am looking after his welfare.' Knowing that Sri Bhagavan had accepted me fully, I thought, how can there be room for anxiety and confusion?

Ramakrishna Swami once received a letter from his elder brother. It stated that Ramakrishna Swami's younger brother, Vasu, who was then studying in high school, was moving closely with a *sadhu*. This *sadhu* had taught him to concentrate on the *sushumna* energy in order to get a vision of light. Prior to meeting this *sadhu*, Vasu, like us, had wanted to follow the path taught by Sri Bhagavan. The letter informed us that the intense concentration between the eyebrows had produced heat in his head. He had also become somewhat disturbed. He had a tendency to shout, 'Iswara! Arunachaleswara! Narayana!' [various names of God] and he was also suffering because he felt unable to eat or sleep. In order to bring him back to a

normal state, his brother had requested that Ramakrishna Swami and I come home and look after him. Sri Bhagavan agreed and initially asked both of us to go. I felt that it would not be good if both of us went because in our absence there would be no one left to serve Sri Bhagavan.

With this thought in my mind I suggested that Ramakrishna Swami should go by himself, but he disagreed and said, 'I do not know anything about this sort of thing. You alone must go.'

Sri Bhagavan then agreed with him and asked me to go alone. 'Only a visit from you will be effective,' he said.

After some discussion it was decided that I should take the evening train to Katpadi and from there go on to Palghat in Kerala. I had no money and Ramakrishna Swami only had enough to buy the train ticket. Although there was no extra money to buy food for the journey, we kept quiet, feeling that we should not trouble Sri Bhagavan with this problem. That afternoon, at around 3 p.m., a devotee unexpectedly brought a lot of *pooris* and served them to Sri Bhagavan and the devotees in the ashram. We were all surprised to see Sri Bhagavan, who normally did not take more than two *pooris*, happily accept six from the devotee. When the serving was over, Sri Bhagavan ate only one of the six and left the remaining five on the plate. Then he asked for paper and thread. He neatly packed and tied the five *pooris* with his own hands and gave me the packet.

He told the rest of us, 'This poor man has only enough money for the train. What will he do for food on the way?'

Everyone was deeply touched by Sri Bhagavan's compassion.

I reached Palghat and went to Vasu's house, I had kept one of the five *pooris* to give to Vasu and his family as *prasad* from Sri Bhagavan. I then asked Vasu what spiritual practices he was doing. I soon realised that his undesirable state and experiences were due to his concentration on a vision of light he was perceiving as a result of focusing on the *sushumna*. I explained to him that if he followed Sri Bhagavan's teachings it would be more beneficial for him, and that he should also do *japa*, keeping the Heart instead of the head as the goal. Unfortunately, because of the state he was in, he could not appreciate my advice. So, after consoling Vasu, I asked his elder brother to arrange to give him the best treatment available from the traditional Kerala school of medicine. Then I went back to Tiruvannamalai.

A few days later Vasu recovered. He began reading Sri Bhagavan's works, regained his mental clarity and resumed his school studies. I saw him a few months later when I went back to Kerala to arrange for the writing of Sri Bhagavan's biography in Malayalam.[34] On that journey I went to Palghat, taking with me the English and Tamil biographies of Sri Bhagavan. I stayed there with Vasu, gave his teacher Appunni all the material and arranged for him to write Sri Bhagavan's life in Malayalam. I was happy to see that Vasu had made a complete recovery. In the years that followed Vasu came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* quite frequently. He eventually served in the army and remained a *brahmachari* all his life.

Once, while going on a pilgrimage, I visited various *maths* before ending up at Peraiyur Santhalinga Math. At that time Veerasubbia Swamigal was resting there because he was not well. When I went and had his *darshan*, he made kind enquiries about the welfare of Sri Bhagavan and the ashram in general. He also looked into the notebook I had with me. Seeing in it the verses of *Ulladu Narpadu* written beautifully by Sri Bhagavan himself, he asked me to read them out to him. He appreciated

[34] This was not the first attempt to record Bhagavan's life in Malayalam. The following story is taken from *The Mountain Path*, 1982, p. 5.

'Soon after Kunju Swami arrived at the ashram a Malayalam visitor came to see Bhagavan, and after staying a few days in the ashram presented him with a manuscript which he said contained a biography of Bhagavan. The manuscript was in Malayalam, and since Bhagavan was familiar with the language, he accepted the manuscript and began to peruse it. He read it from beginning to end, occasionally stopping to make spelling or grammatical corrections to the text. When he had finally finished reading it he returned it to the author with a smile. This incident generated considerable excitement among the devotees since no biography of Bhagavan had ever appeared before. Unfortunately, though, no one in the ashram apart from Bhagavan could read Malayalam except Kunju Swami, and he was temporarily absent. When he eventually returned he was given the manuscript and was asked to translate its contents for the benefit of the assembled devotees. Kunju Swami began to read the account but was horrified at what he read. The biography was mostly fiction. Among other things it stated that Bhagavan was married and it gave a long list of all the *siddhis* he had attained and all the spectacular miracles he had performed. None of them were true.

the first benedictory verse so much, he asked me to read it three times.

After the third reading he remarked, 'This is a very profound verse. Not only that, all the elegant features of prosody are in it. Until now, I was under the impression that your swami was an adept only in 'keeping still', but now I discover that he is also a superb writer of fine poetry. The *venba* is itself a difficult metre that few poets dare attempt. Bhagavan has composed all forty-two verses in this metre and used them to convey the most abstruse philosophical ideas. Crowning them all, though, is this first invocatory verse:

> If the Reality [Being] did not exist, could there exist the consciousness 'am'? Since Reality exists in the Heart, devoid of thought, how can one meditate upon that Reality whose name is 'Heart'. Abiding in the Heart as it is alone is meditation.[35]

'I myself,' continued Veerasubbia Swamigal, 'possess the attainment of *sastra samadhi*. When I start reading or writing

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Kunju Swami rushed off to see Bhagavan and asked him, 'Is all this true?'

Bhagavan looked at him quietly for a while and then said, pointing at the world, 'Is all this true? [Then, pointing at the manuscript] Is this alone false?'

The manuscript was never published since the author was unable to find a publisher who would take his work.'

The account seemed to be a classic case of projection because another old devotee who knew about this manuscript told me that in the book Bhagavan was made out to be a former railway clerk with several children. Its author was also a railway clerk who was married and had several children.

[35] In Tamil this is a literary *tour de force* to which no English translation can do justice. The repeated motif throughout the verse is the Tamil root *ul* that is both the infinitive and the imperative of the verb to be. *Ul* is repeated eight times, sometimes as *ullam*, which means 'the Heart' or 'am'. The repetitions of *ul* indicate both the nature of reality and the means by which it can be experienced. Taken together they point out that Being alone exists as Reality, as the Heart, and that one cannot meditate *on* it, because there is no entity separate *from* it to do the meditating. One can only be it. All this has been phrased in elegant pure Tamil in a metre of daunting complexity.

books, I am so completely immersed in them, I will not even be aware of hunger, thirst, or even the passage of time. Only when someone comes and reminds me will I get up and complete my daily duties. Now that the doctor has asked me to take a complete rest, I find it extremely difficult to keep quiet without engaging in reading and writing. So, since you are here, please read out to me the works of Sri Bhagavan.'

I read out Sri Bhagavan's written works, which I had copied in my notebook, and he very much enjoyed listening to them.

He told the other *sadhus* in the *math*, 'Because Sri Bhagavan left school at sixteen and did not take lessons in Vedanta from any guru, some people think that he does not know any Vedanta. But the greatness of the vedantic tradition and the depth of Sri Bhagavan's experience of it are clearly to be found in these works.'

After speaking joyfully in such glowing terms, he pointed to me and said, 'See how well he reads Tamil even though he is a Malayali. This is also due to the greatness of the place he lives in.'

On my return to the ashram I told Sri Bhagavan about the conversations that had taken place at the *math* and about my reading out his verses.

Sri Bhagavan heard my story and remarked, 'Veerasubbia Swamigal is a great scholar. He has translated the Hindi *Atma Purana* into Tamil and written a commentary on *Jnana Vasishtam*. He is also the head of all the vedantins of Kovilur Math.'

Sri Bhagavan was then reminded of an incident which had taken place many years before: 'When I was in Virupaksha Cave, Veerasubbia Swamigal came to see me along with some other heads of *maths*. When all were sitting quietly, those who had come with Veerasubbia Swamigal gestured to him.

'He acknowledged the gesture and spoke to me with great hesitation:

'"Swami, these people want to have their questions answered by you. Although I myself do not want to trouble you, I am asking you merely because they want to have their desire fulfilled."

'Then, acting as their spokesman, he asked me about the spiritual practices leading to *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi*. I explained to them the six types of *samadhi* and how, through

strength of practice, *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi* could be attained. I told them that one who has attained this state, although he sees, he does not see; though he listens, he does not listen; though he acts, he does not act. I showed them my Tamil translation of Adi Sankara's *Vivekachudamani* and *Drik Drishya Viveka* and pointed to the six types of *samadhi* that are mentioned there. On seeing these works Veerasubbia Swamigal was overjoyed, while the others were struck with wonder.'[36]

Only a great one can appreciate another great person. Was it not due to my past merit that I had the good fortune of staying with these two great men and listening to their appreciative remarks as they praised each other?

Sri Bhagavan once commented on his own experience of the *sahaja* state of *samadhi* after a concert that had been arranged by Rao Bahadur Veerappa Chettiar, a hereditary trustee of the Arunachaleswara Temple. Every year, during the annual Karttikai festival, he arranged concerts in the temple by famous musicians. Some of them would also perform in the ashram. On one such occasion Ariakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar gave a music concert accompanied by Pudukkottai Dakshinamurty Pillai and Sundaram Iyer. The concert lasted from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sri Bhagavan, who usually went out at 5.30 p.m., stayed for the whole performance. Both the performers and the listeners totally forgot themselves in the joy of being and performing in Sri Bhagavan's presence. At the end of the concert, when the performers came out of the hall after prostrating to Sri Bhagavan, Kumbakonam Iyengar Swami gave them *tambulam* [a mixture wrapped in a betel leaf, eaten as an aid to digestion or merely for pleasure] and put sandal paste on them with his own hands. All this was to show his appreciation of the performers. Sri Bhagavan, who was observing all this through the window, was delighted by Iyengar Swami's enthusiasm. The artists and the other visitors returned to town in a state of great satisfaction.

Later, when we were all resting after finishing our supper, a devotee said to Sri Bhagavan, 'Today's concert was superb. We even forgot where we were. I wonder what it was like for Sri Bhagavan?'

[36] The six *samadhis* are listed in a tabular form in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi,* talk no. 391, along with a brief explanation. They are also explained in *Guru Ramana,* 6th ed., pp. 87–91.

Sri Bhagavan answered, 'I was only aware of their coming, their prostrations to me and the beginning of their performance. After that, the next thing I remember is their getting up at the end of the concert. The person within me consumes everything. Who then can do the listening?'

From this remark it is clear that Sri Bhagavan himself is a living testimony to his earlier comment about one who is in *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi*: 'Though he sees, he does not see; though he hears, he does not hear; though he acts, he does not act.'

At the end of the Karttikai festival, this same Veerappa Chettiar used to arrange, on a large scale, a *bhiksha* in the ashram for Sri Bhagavan.

When Seshadri Swami fell ill and looked as though he was going to die, Veerappa Chettiar wanted to build a *samadhi* shrine for him. He came and asked Sri Bhagavan about the rules to be followed in its construction. Sri Bhagavan took out Tirumular's *Tirumantiram* and asked someone to copy out the relevant verses and give them to Chettiar. Using this account, Chettiar constructed the *samadhi* on the land adjoining Sri Ramanasramam, completing it in twenty days. On the day after he completed it [14th January, 1929] Sri Seshadri Swami, who wanted to give up his body, attained *mahasamadhi*. Sri Bhagavan was invited to attend the *samadhi* ceremony by Veerappa Chettiar and a few other devotees. He obliged them by attending and staying till it was over. After participating in the *samadhi* ceremony of his mother in 1922, this was the only similar function that Sri Bhagavan attended.[37]

Sri Bhagavan often pointed out that the *sahaja*, or 'natural' *samadhi* state, was quite different from states such as *laya* in which the mind becomes so deeply absorbed in a trance that the person who experiences it cannot easily be roused to a normal waking consciousness. An Andhra man called Sankarananda, who was employed in the Postal Department, used to stand in water and do *japa* for hours at a time. While doing this *japa* he would often go into *laya samadhi* and be

[37] During the course of a conversation I had with him, Kunju Swami told me that both he and Bhagavan attended Jada Swami's funeral service in the late 1920s. Bhagavan also attended the burial ceremonies of the animals that are interred in the ashram.

unable to perform any work. He took some days off from his job and came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, but whenever he sat in the hall, he used to go into a state of *laya*.

Seeing this, Sri Bhagavan said, '*Laya* [an unconscious mental stupor], *vikshepa* [diversity] and *kashaya* [latent impurities] are the three obstacles to *jnana*. The practices of *sravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana* [hearing, recollection and contemplation] have been created to prevent one from being caught in *laya*. Do not allow him [Sankarananda] to remain sitting in one place. Make him walk around to stop him falling into *laya*. Engage him in conversation about self-enquiry. If you do all these things he will be cured of his problem.'

As a result of our following these instructions, Sankarananda's *laya* state changed and he became a follower of the path of self-enquiry.

The *sahaja* state is a permanent one. It is not a state that one enters or leaves. A visit to the ashram by Satchidananda Yogeeswara of Cudappa, a man who went 'into' and 'out of' *samadhi*, gave us an opportunity to explain the real nature of *sahaja samadhi*. The swami, a famous hatha yogi, was touring the whole of India, staying in all the important ashrams for three days and giving discourses. During his tour he also came to Tiruvannamalai. He visited the ashram, conversed for some time with Sri Bhagavan, and then returned to where he was staying in the town. Since those who had accompanied him invited us to come and listen to his discourse, I and a devotee called Palanimalai, who was a knowledgeable man, went to attend the meeting.

When we arrived we were told by one of his followers, 'Swami is in *samadhi*. He will come out of it at a specific time and only after that will the discourse start.'

Then he asked us, 'At what times is your Bhagavan in *samadhi*?'

Hearing this, Palanimalai Swami could not suppress a burst of laughter, though he tried unsuccessfully to change it into an 'Is that so?' The disciple of the yogi asked us the reason for his laughter.

I replied, 'There is no schedule for *jnanis*. They do not go into *samadhi* or come out of it at specific times. Because he knows this he had to laugh when he heard you speak about entering and leaving *samadhi*.'

Then, to make my meaning more clear, I added, 'Sri Bhagavan is always in *sahaja nishta* [the natural state]'.

After staying there for some time and listening to his discourse, we returned to the ashram. As usual, Sri Bhagavan enquired about what had taken place at the meeting.

When I told him what had happened, he said with a smile, 'People are under the impression that the state of *samadhi* is something limited by times and places. They think that sitting still in one place for hours together, without any movement and with the eyes closed, alone is *samadhi.* What to do?'

There is a verse in *Jnana Vasishtam* about *samadhi*:

> Those who do not have perfect peace will not get established in *samadhi*, even if they sit in *padmasana* with their hands in special positions. Only Self-knowledge, which is a fire for the straws of desires, is superb *samadhi.* Remaining still is not *samadhi.*

Sri Bhagavan has himself said in verse thirty-one of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*:

> As the movement of the cart, its standing still and its being unyoked are to the passenger asleep in the cart, even so are action, contemplation and sleep to the sage asleep in the cart of his body.

In 1932, after spending about twelve years in personal attendance on Sri Bhagavan, I began to feel an urge to devote myself entirely to *sadhana.* I wanted to spend all my time alone. However, I could not easily reconcile myself to the idea of giving up my personal services to Sri Bhagavan. I had been debating the matter for some days when the answer came in a strange way. As I entered the hall one day I heard Sri Bhagavan explain to others who were there that real service to him did not mean attending to his physical needs, it meant following the essence of his teachings. That is, concentrating on realising the Self. Needless to say, that automatically cleared my doubts.

I had heard Sri Bhagavan speak like this before. Once I had heard him say, 'It is no use saying to oneself, "I am doing personal service to Sri Bhagavan; I am dusting his bed; I have served him for so many years". In addition to serving the Guru physically, it is also important to follow the path shown by the Guru. The best service to the Guru is engaging in *vichara, dhyana* and

other practices with a purity of body, speech and mind.'

When Sri Bhagavan spoke like this he would often point out verse eighty-seven of *Kaivalyam*, part one, in which the disciple asks the Guru how he can repay him for the grace he has received. The Guru replies that the highest return the disciple can render to the Guru is to remain fixed in the Self without being caught by the three kinds of obstacles that obstruct it. Hearing Sri Bhagavan speak like this made me resolve to find a new attendant so that I could devote myself full-time to meditation.

While I was in this frame of mind I paid a visit to Palanimalai Swami, a devotee of Sri Bhagavan who had started an ashram in a village in Kerala. During my stay there, he introduced me to a man called Madhavan. He told me that this Madhavan would like to stay in a *math* and, knowing of my knowledge of such places, asked me to arrange it. Instead, I asked Madhavan to come to Tiruvannamalai. I visited a few other places on my trip and then returned to Tiruvannamalai. Madhavan arrived soon afterwards.

In those days, as Sri Bhagavan was in good health, there was not much work either for me or for Ramakrishna Swami, Sri Bhagavan's other attendant. I therefore thought that I would ask Madhavan to do service to Sri Bhagavan instead of me so that I could go and live in Palakottu and practise self-enquiry. He agreed, and I spent a week teaching him how to be Sri Bhagavan's personal attendant. Then, one night, when Sri Bhagavan was alone, I approached him and asked for his permission to give up my job and live in Palakottu. I told him that till then I had been spending most of my time attending on him. I formally asked his permission to give up this job and requested him to tell me how I should lead my life in Palakottu. Sri Bhagavan's answer gave me the impression that my request was both proper and correct.

He said, with a smile, 'It is enough if the mind is kept one-pointedly on *vichara*, *dhyana*, *japa* and *parayana* without seeking anything else'.

I left feeling that I had received the full blessings of Sri Bhagavan.

Though I had given up my ashram duties, I found it hard to decide how exactly I should spend the entire day in search of realisation. I referred the matter to Sri Bhagavan and he amplified the advice he had already given me.

'Make self-enquiry your final aim,' he said, 'but also practise meditation, *japa* and *parayana*. If you find one method irksome or difficult, switch to one of the others. In the course of time the *sadhana* will become stabilised in self-enquiry and will culminate in pure consciousness or realisation.'

I left the ashram early the next morning and stayed in the room adjacent to the Vinayaka Temple in Palakottu, observing silence all the time. Sabapathy Pillai, the *pujari* of the Vinayaka Temple, had a high regard for *sadhus* and was devoted to their well being. He used to come from the town at 5.30 a.m. for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. Afterwards he would have his bath in Palakottu and perform the daily worship of the Vinayaka image, offering cooked rice as *naivedya*. Later, he would take *sambar* from the ashram, mix it with this rice and eat it. In the evening he would collect flowers for the big temple, come for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, and then return to town.

On the first day of my stay at Palakottu, Sabapathy Pillai noticed that I was in *mauna* and that I had not taken any food, so he gave me a portion of the *naivedya*. I happily ate it. He continued to share his food with me on each of the succeeding days. Even while I had been staying in the ashram I had only eaten one meal a day. I would just take lunch there and eat some fruit in the evening, if any was available. I did not therefore find it difficult to live on one meal a day.

I soon established a new routine. In the mornings and evenings I would go to the ashram and sit in the presence of Sri Bhagavan. On my evening visit I would join in the *parayana*. After one week had passed in this way a man called Puduppalayam Rangaswami Gounder came to the ashram.

Sri Bhagavan asked him, 'Why have you made this unexpected visit? Have you come to see your friend?' Sri Bhagavan was referring to me.

Gounder replied, 'I have not yet seen him, but I intend to go to see him soon'.

Then he added, 'Sri Bhagavan appeared to me in a dream last night and asked me, "Why are you sleeping like this when your friend is going without food?" So I left immediately and came here.'

Sri Bhagavan smiled and said, 'All right, go and see him after taking your meal'.

Because I was observing silence, when Gounder came to see me he could only ascertain what had happened by talking to Sabapathy Pillai. Then, when he discovered how precarious my position was, he gave Rs 25 to Sabapathy Pillai and asked him to look after all my needs. He stayed in the ashram for a few more days before returning to Puduppalayam. Three weeks later another devotee called Kannuswami, who lived in Kumbakonam and who came frequently for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, came to the ashram. After looking in vain for me inside the ashram he came to Palakottu and found me there. When he saw that I was living on cold rice supplied by others, he thought that it would be better if I cooked my own food. On returning to Kumbakonam he sent me a cooker and some money for my expenses. Narasimha Swami, an expert on cookers, taught me how to use it. With money, food and cooking equipment at my disposal, I began a new phase of my stay in Palakottu.

Other *sadhus* soon began to settle down in Palakottu. Paul Brunton, Bhikku Prajnananda, Munagala Venkataramiah, Viswanatha Swami, Yogi Ramaiah, Muruganar Swami and Mouni Srinivasa Rao all built or moved into huts there. Devotees from outside Tiruvannamalai would, after having Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, often come to tranquil Palakottu to see the *sadhus* who lived there. Palakottu in those days was like Swargashram near Swami Sivananda's ashram in Rishikesh: a place where many *sadhus* lived a simple life in close proximity to a neighbouring large ashram.

After I had settled down in Palakottu, I got into the habit of going to Skandashram early in the morning. As I walked up the hill I would do *parayana*. I would have my morning bath there and return at about 7.30 a.m. Since this was the time that Sri Bhagavan had his after-breakfast walk on the hill, I was always able to have a *darshan* on my return trip.

When Sri Bhagavan learned that I was doing continuous *parayana* while going to and from Skandashram, he said appreciatively, 'That alone is good. Very appropriate. If you carry on like this, you will also be relieved of the strain of walking.'

From that time till now, while walking in the morning, I always do *parayana*.

One of the devotees who joined us in Palakottu was Ramanatha Brahmachari. He was the boy, mentioned earlier,

whom Sri Bhagavan had looked after when the former had had bubonic plague. Ramanatha Brahmachari was a tireless worker, and in addition to being a devotee of Sri Bhagavan, he was also a follower of Mahatma Gandhi.

Of his own accord he would clean all our huts in Palakottu. In the evening he would prepare the wicks, pour oil and light the lamps. He was always looking for odd jobs to do.

In those days we were all quite young and thought we were great ascetics. We would not bother to sweep our rooms in Palakottu, nor care to light the lamps. If there was no fuel, we might even skip our meals. But Ramanatha Brahmachari would take care of all these chores whether we asked him to or not.

Once, when we were all sitting in front of Sri Bhagavan, a letter was received from Ekanatha Rao. He had made enquiries about 'the *sarvadhikari* of Palakottu'.

When Sri Bhagavan read that, he enquired, 'Who is this? I don't know anything about this.'

I got up and nervously pointed to Ramanatha Brahmachari. 'We call him the *sarvadhikari* of Palakottu. He buys our things, cleans our lamps, sweeps our floors. So we call him the Palakottu *sarvadhikari*.'[38]

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Why didn't you tell me about this? With a *sarvadhikari* like this, everyone should be happy.'

Ramanatha Brahmachari got up very shyly and said, 'I don't know, Bhagavan. They gave me that name as a joke.'

'What is funny about it?' asked Sri Bhagavan. 'It is a good name.'

Years later, when news came to the ashram that Ramanatha Brahmachari had passed away in Madras, Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'Look! These verses, *Ramana Stotra Anubhuti*, were written by Ramanatha himself. Another song with the refrain

[38] *Sarvadhikari* literally means 'ruler of all'. It was the title assumed by Chinnaswami, Sri Bhagavan's brother, when he took over the ashram management. Prior to that time different people had looked after different aspects of the ashram's affairs. By calling himself the *sarvadhikari*, Chinnaswami was indicating that he was in sole charge of all the ashram's different departments. However, the title is often used in a pejorative way. A totalitarian dictator would also be called a *sarvadhikari* in Tamil. That is why Kunju Swami was a little nervous about telling this story to Bhagavan.

Tiruchuzhinathanai kandene was also written by him. It has an interesting story.

'During my stay in Virupaksha Cave, one full moon night we set out on a *giri pradakshina.* Chidambaram Subramanya Iyer was here at that time. The moonlight was bright and all were in high spirits. The devotees decided to hold a symposium while on the move and each person was to give a speech on a different subject. Subramanya Iyer was elected chairman of the meeting. The first lecture was by Ramanatha. The topic chosen by him was: "The similarity between the *Paramatman* dwelling in the cave of the human Heart, Lord Nataraja dwelling in Chidambaram, and Sri Ramana in Virupaksha Cave." The chairman allowed him half an hour. There was no end to the points of similarity brought out by him. When the chairman declared that the time was up, Ramanatha said, "Just half an hour more please". It was a meeting of people who were continuously walking. Saying, "A little more time, a little more time," he went on with his speech for three full hours before the chairman finally put a stop to his further talking. You should have seen the enthusiasm with which he spoke that day.'

Ramanatha Brahmachari later summarised the points of the lecture into a song of four stanzas entitled *Tiruchuzhinathanai Kandene.* Part of this song reads:

> I have seen the Lord of Tiruchuzhi and, unable to turn back, I stood there transfixed. He is the Lord who dances in Chidambaram, protects the helpless and is merciful to them. The same Lord of Tiruchuzhi manifests himself as God in Virupaksha Cave on the hill in sacred Tiruvannamalai.... He is the Lord of Tiruchuzhi. I saw him and stood there, unable to move.[39]

At about 11 a.m. after the lunch bell went in the ashram, the residents of Palakottu returned to their homes. After finishing his lunch Sri Bhagavan would come to Palakottu to visit us. All of us would be waiting there to have his *darshan.* Sri Bhagavan

[39] Ramanatha Brahamachari had first come to Bhagavan as a teenager in 1912. At the time he was studying in the *Veda Patasala* in town. One look from Sri Bhagavan was enough to capture his heart. From then on he spent every spare moment with Sri Bhagavan on the hill. It is this look which is referred to in the poem.

would enquire about our welfare and make us, who had taken refuge in him, feel happy by his motherly affection and solicitude.

During my stay in Palakottu I invariably went to the ashram to attend the daily *parayana.* Although I was no longer Sri Bhagavan's attendant, in my early years in Palakottu I still managed to speak to him at least once a day. But when the ashram expanded in the 1930s, the number of visitors increased so much, there were occasionally days when I could not speak even a single word to him. On such days during *parayana* I would deliberately leave out a line of the text I was reading from. Sri Bhagavan, who would always listen attentively to the *parayana,* would immediately correct the mistake. By making mistakes in this way I would get the satisfaction of having Sri Bhagavan say a few words to me. I would use a similar trick when I wanted Sri Bhagavan to write in my *parayana* notebook: while copying, I would leave out a line in the middle. Sri Bhagavan would invariably notice it and correct it for me. Sri Bhagavan made many such entries in my book. I still keep that notebook with me and preserve it as a treasure.

On one occasion I wanted to paste a picture of Arunachala in the front of this notebook. Sri Bhagavan, who was compassion incarnate, somehow came to know of my desire. He took the notebook and drew a beautiful picture of Arunachala on one of the pages with his own hands. This picture of Arunachala appeared for many years on the cover of *The Mountain Path.*

Many of us had the good fortune of having little books with Sri Bhagavan's handwriting in them. Those who did not have personal notebooks would often have little pamphlets containing Sri Bhagavan's written works in which Sri Bhagavan himself had made some proof-reading marks. Whenever books such as *Ulladu Narpadu* or *Upadesa Undiyar* were printed, all the page proofs would be shown to Sri Bhagavan. After he had corrected them, he would make a book out of them. If any pages were missing, he would copy them out neatly himself. By preserving and binding all these printer's proofs, he was able to make an additional two or three copies of each book. Sri Bhagavan would always keep the copy that had the maximum number of mistakes before giving the others to devotees in the hall.

At distribution time he would say, 'These are enough for us. If we wanted to have new copies, where would we go for the money? No one will want copies like these and no one will steal them.'

In this way, through his kind words, he ensured that we were conscious of the merit of having few or no possessions.

* * *

Everyone knows what great stress Sri Bhagavan lays on *atma vichara*, self-enquiry. He wrote in *Atma Vidya Kirtanam*, 'Self-knowledge is an easy thing, the easiest thing there is'.

Yet, surprisingly, not once of his own accord did he ever ask any devotee to follow this method. He could have ordered the practice of self-enquiry, and all the devotees would have blindly and willingly followed.

Let me give some examples. Yogi Ramaiah, who was very close to Sri Bhagavan for many years, used to practise hatha yoga. Sri Bhagavan approved of the ashram providing him with a special diet that was part of his yogic regimen. Sri Bhagavan would visit him in his cave in Palakottu, and Yogi would accompany him on his walks. Yogi was quite free to be with Sri Bhagavan whenever he chose. Yet there is nothing on record to show that Sri Bhagavan ever told him to do *atma vichara* instead of *pranayama* or hatha yoga.

Mudaliar Patti's son, Tambiran Swami, was a Virasaiva and followed the practices of this sect. He would collect flowers from the garden only at noon. Then he would perform a *puja* at the tank in Palakottu, making a *lingam* out of the flowers, and worship the same *lingam* with more flowers. Day after day Sri Bhagavan would watch this without making any comment.

Tambiran Swami was a very weak and slow-moving man. By the time he had finished his cooking and had his meal after this late *puja*, it would be evening.

Sri Bhagavan once joked, 'Poor god. He has to wait so long for *naivedya* food offering since the *puja* itself takes so long to complete.'

But never once did Sri Bhagavan tell him, 'Why do you waste your time like this? You could spend your time better by doing self-enquiry.'

Sri Bhagavan never even asked close devotees whether they

meditated or did self-enquiry. His teaching was the highest, but it was left entirely to us to practise it or to leave it.

I will give one more example. During the early years of the ashram, one could not avoid noticing an enormous man called Dandapani Swami who first came to see Sri Bhagavan when the latter was still living at Skandashram. A couple of days after his arrival he said to Sri Bhagavan that although he had a large family, he was renouncing all worldly activities. He also said that he was taking Sri Bhagavan as his sole refuge and requested him to give him some *upadesa*.

'What is *upadesa*?' responded Sri Bhagavan, 'It is only remaining in the Self as the Self.'

Dandapani Swami persisted with his request and asked Sri Bhagavan several times for some specific *upadesa*. Knowing that he would not give up asking, Sri Bhagavan eventually asked him what practices he had been doing in the past.

Dandapani Swami answered, 'I know nothing, but I have performed ten million Rama *nama japa*'.

'That is enough,' said Sri Bhagavan. 'What more is needed? It will be enough if you can continue that practice without a break.'

When Dandapani Swami then asked him how to do *japa* properly, Sri Bhagavan replied, 'There are three kinds of *japa*: *uccha japa, upamsu japa* and *manasika japa*. *Uccha japa* is done with lip movements. Superior to this is *upamsu japa* in which the mantra is uttered orally but without any lip movement. The best is *manasika japa* in which the mantra is uttered using the mind itself as the mouth. It will be enough if you can continuously practise in this way.'

On hearing this Dandapani Swami felt satisfied. After staying for some time in the ashram he returned to Madras. It is interesting to note that some years later, wearing only a loincloth, he went to the house of his son-in-law, Subramania Iyer, who was then a pandit in Northwick School, Rayapuram. Telling him that he had become a *sannyasin* and that he received *upadesa* from Sri Bhagavan, he gave a copy of *Aksharamanamalai* to him. This visit by Dandapani Swami was instrumental in bringing Subramania Iyer, who was later known as Muruganar, to Sri Bhagavan.

Sri Bhagavan often read out passages from the Malayalam

version of the *Adhyatma Ramayana*. One of his favourite passages was one in which Hanuman explains to Ravana the glory of devotion to Rama. Sri Bhagavan quoted this passage when Dandapani Swami asked for some *upadesa*. He knew that Dandapani Swami, a confirmed Rama *bhakta,* would appreciate the passage and that it would encourage him to continue with his Rama *japa*. Sri Bhagavan's response on this occasion was a typical one. Whenever someone begged him for some special *upadesa,* he used to ask him what he was already practising. If the questioner said that he had done no *sadhana*, Sri Bhagavan would often ask him which of the gods or goddesses he liked best. The devotee was bound to mention Rama or Krishna or Devi or some other deity. Sri Bhagavan would then ask him to think of that god or goddess constantly. He never discouraged anyone or decried the beliefs and practices of others. Thus it was that Dandapani Swami, who was a simple devotee of Rama, was advised by Sri Bhagavan to continue with his devotional practices.

Sri Bhagavan's presence and teachings gave hope and strength to different classes of seekers at different levels. As I have already demonstrated, the teachings were not limited to those who took pure enquiry, as is often assumed. Sri Bhagavan gave help and guidance to all kinds of people on all kinds of paths and never demanded that devotees change from one *sadhana* to another.

An important corollary of this is that it is the intensity of one's practice and the one-pointedness with which one follows it that secures results, irrespective of the method chosen. Chanting of *stotras, japa, dhyana* and self-enquiry are generally held to be ascending stages of *sadhana.* Sri Bhagavan confirmed this, but he also made clear that this did not mean that all stages were necessarily to be gone through by everyone. There have been notable exceptions, for example, the four great Tamil saints, Appar, Jnanasambandhar, Sundaramurti and Manikkavachagar, who sang the praises of Lord Siva. They achieved *akandakara vritti* [unbroken experience] merely by constantly remembering the name of God. With these saints, where was the need for self-enquiry? Its result was already there.

Sri Bhagavan's non-interference extended to our personal lives. Unless asked directly, he would not tell us what to do, what not to do, where to go and so on. Nayana, for example,

was very much respected by Sri Bhagavan. But when he was about to leave for Sirsi, never to return to Arunachala, Sri Bhagavan did not say, 'Why should you go? You can stay here itself.'

Muruganar, another great devotee, used to go out begging for his food while the ashram was serving food to hundreds of people. Sri Bhagavan never asked him why he took the trouble of begging when he could eat in the ashram itself. Sri Bhagavan was utterly detached from these things, for nothing ever affected him.

I can give an even more extreme example. Once when Sri Bhagavan's brother, Niranjanananda Swami, was being physically lifted and carried away by a group of people who were threatening to kill him, he was absolutely unperturbed. He did not even turn his head in their direction. In the evening when Niranjanananda Swami came back unharmed and sat in front of Sri Bhagavan, he took no notice of his safe return. Of course it was his grace that saved Niranjanananda Swami that day – but that is a different matter altogether.

Totally detached, Sri Bhagavan was never affected by events like these. It was not that he did not notice what was going on around him. On the contrary, if someone walked in after a twenty-year absence, Sri Bhagavan would immediately recognise him and would often give a detailed account of what that person had been doing and saying on his previous trip twenty years before.

This attitude of aloof detachment may possibly have arisen out of his *samatva bhava,* his feeling that, as all are phenomena appearing in the Self, all people and all things are equal, and of the same nature.

If anyone tried to tell Sri Bhagavan, 'You are a realised sage, we are ignorant and unrealised,' he would respond by saying, 'Where is the ignorance and who is unrealised?'

There were no others for him to see, no devotees at different levels of spiritual evolution. In his sight everyone was a *jnani* and everything was the Self.

In the old days, when we had the benefit of regularly receiving personal instructions from Sri Bhagavan, one of them was that we should get into a meditative state before going to sleep. If this was done, Sri Bhagavan said, sleep overtook one as a natural

sequel to fatigue and was not induced or preceded by lying down. Also, we were advised to go into meditation first thing in the morning, immediately after getting out of bed. This ensured a serenity of mind and also a feeling of tirelessness throughout the day. If this was done, he said, the state of mind experienced immediately before sleep is resumed on waking.

Sri Bhagavan also stressed the importance of developing good tendencies, likening the practice to sowing a ripe seed. A ripe seed thrown carelessly on rocky soil will sprout and grow, even after a thousand years. It will never go to waste. Likewise, good tendencies.

Ultimately whatever path one takes, one needs the grace of the Lord.

Sri Bhagavan was asked on one occasion, 'You have written, in *Atma Vidya Kirtanam,* "Self-knowledge is an easy thing, the easiest thing there is". Other people say it is the most difficult thing to get. Can one get this Self-knowledge so easily, and unaided?'

Sri Bhagavan pointed out that the final words of the verse read, 'Grace, too, is needed'.

This, he said, was the key to understanding the whole verse.

The grace of the Guru works in different ways. In scriptures the working of grace is compared to the ways in which fish, tortoises and birds cause their eggs to hatch. The ancients believed that the mere look of the fish was sufficient to bring life to its eggs. The tortoise they believed, stayed at some distance from its eggs and by the power of its presence and by its intense concentration on them, caused its eggs to hatch. The third category, the birds, need to have physical contact with their eggs. Sitting on them, they incubate them by the warmth of their body. In this analogy it is the fish which is the most powerful. By their mere look, their eggs hatch.

This is how Sri Bhagavan's grace worked. He did not need to initiate or transmit grace by touching devotees, nor did he even seem to need to concentrate on them. A single look was often enough to transform whomever his gaze fell upon. All those who have experienced that look of grace can testify to the tremendous impact it had on them. That silent look transmitted his highest teachings.

A devotee once complained that Sri Bhagavan gave the

highest teachings to everyone, irrespective of their limitations. That particular devotee thought that beginners should be given preliminary exercises, along the lines prescribed by traditional Gurus. He even offered to teach these people himself and initiate them![40] It is a measure of Sri Bhagavan's greatness that he said that he was not interested in handing out half-truths and lesser teachings. What mattered to him was the dissemination of the purest truth, and for that we shall be eternally grateful.

[40] An expanded version of this story, told by Kunju Swami himself, can be found in *Bhagavan Sri Ramana, a Pictorial Biography*. p. 74.

'Once, when Ganapati Muni was present in the hall, a group of villagers asked, "How are we to control the mind?"

'In reply Bhagavan asked them to look into the origin of the mind and explained the path of self-enquiry. Soon they left and Bhagavan as usual went out for a walk.

'Remarking to the others the Muni said, "The path of Self-knowledge which Bhagavan teaches is so difficult even for the learned, and Bhagavan advocated it to the poor villagers. I doubt whether they understood it and still less whether they can practise it. If Bhagavan had advised them to practise some *puja* or *japa*, that would have been more practical."

'When this was conveyed to Bhagavan, he commented, "What to do? This is what I know. If a teaching is to be imparted according to the traditional way, one must first see whether the recipient is qualified or not. Then *puja, japa* or *dhyana* are prescribed step by step. Later the Guru says that this is all only preliminary and one has to transcend all this. Finally, the ultimate truth that '*Brahman* alone is real' is revealed and to realise this the direct path of self-enquiry is to be taught. Why this roundabout process? Should we not state the ultimate truth and the direct path at the beginning itself rather than advocating many methods and rejecting them at the end?"'

Muruganar

Muruganar (1893-1973) is widely regarded as being one of the foremost devotees of Bhagavan. He was instrumental in getting Bhagavan to compose the verses that comprise Ulladu Narpadu *and* Upadesa Undiyar, *two of Bhagavan's major philosophical poems, and he composed thousands of poems of his own that either praised Bhagavan, recorded his teachings or expressed gratitude to Bhagavan for having established him in the Self.*

In his earlier life he was known as C. K. Subramania Iyer, although his parents called him Sambamurthi. Before coming to Bhagavan he was a well-respected Tamil scholar who served on a prestigious committee that was compiling the definitive Tamil dictionary. He also worked as a schoolteacher and private tutor.

It was a visit by Dandapani Swami, his father-in-law, that prompted him to go to Tiruvannamalai in September 1923. Dandapani Swami showed him Aksharamanamalai, *Bhagavan's 108 verses in praise of Arunachala. Muruganar immediately recognised that Bhagavan was the Guru he had been actively seeking. He decided to pay a visit to Tiruvannamalai and see him. On the way there he composed eleven verses in the Arunachaleswara Temple. Most of the verses, addressed to Bhagavan as Siva, contained pleas for grace. Muruganar has described this first visit and the background that led up to it in two of his poetical compositions:*

> *'Will I, an unworthy ignorant one, ever be accepted as a devotee by Lord Siva who, as the Divine Guru with the wealth of grace, showed clearly to the world the greatness of Manikkavachagar? And even if I get such a chance, will I be able to sing of the glories of his grace-showering feet in the same way as* Tiruvachakam *[Manikkavachagar's most famous poetical work]?'*
>
> *Like many other thoughts that arose in my mind, this thought, a long time ago, appeared and disappeared, like a flash of lightning manifesting in the sky.*
>
> *Then I heard from devotees who had redeemed*

themselves by taking as their support the grace of the one at Tiruvannamalai, who is the embodiment of true jnana, *and who shines as the flame of true* tapas. *When they spoke of the greatness of his grace, they melted in joy. Hearing them, I was lost in admiration and unceasing joy...*

The compassionate Supreme One, who is endowed with jnana, *then decided in his heart to be my Lord and Master.*

There was in me a thirst, an intense longing to subside [into the Self], that was prompted by the thought of the divine feet, which abound in grace. So, like one who, suffering from thirst, comes across a Ganges of cold water, on an auspicious day, a golden day for my thirst, I went [to Ramana Maharshi] with eleven verses that began 'Leaving Mount Kailas...' and met the excellent sage, the jnana *Guru, the ocean of* mauna, *the bestower of* jnana.

In the same way that wax melts on encountering fire, on seeing his feet, my mind dissolved and lost its form. Like the calf finding its mother, my heart melted and rejoiced in his feet. The hairs on my body stood on end. Devotion surged in me like an ocean that has seen the full moon. Through the grace of chitsakti *[the power inherent in consciousness], my soul was in ecstasy.*

With an unsteady and quivering voice, I read the eleven verses and placed them at his feet. At that very moment he graciously looked at me with his lotus eyes. From that day on, the praises given out by my impartial tongue belonged only to him.

From the way he bestowed his grace, becoming my Lord and Master, I was completely convinced that he was Siva himself. As my new 'owner', he made my 'I' and 'mine' his own.

Even if I get submerged in the miry mud [of this world], I will not forget the mighty nobility of the bountiful bestower of grace.[1]

[1] *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, 'Origin of the work', lines 1–16, and *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, *'Tiruvandappahudi'*, lines 49–80.

In September 1923 Bhagavan was still living in a small thatched hut that had been erected over his mother's samadhi. *Muruganar felt unsure of the correct way of approaching Bhagavan, so he remained for some time outside the hut. Bhagavan solved the problem by coming outside and saying* 'Enna?' *['What?']. In Tamil Nadu, this is a standard way of ascertaining what business a new visitor has.*

In response to this query Muruganar began to sing the verses that had been composed by him in the temple, but emotion got the better of him. Tears welled up in his eyes and he was unable to proceed.

'Can't you read?' asked Bhagavan. 'Give it to me. I shall read it myself.'

Bhagavan then read out the poem. Up till this time Muruganar had been very particular about annotating his poems with a specific raga *or melody, since it was traditional that particular metres or themes had to be sung in a particular way. After this first encounter with Bhagavan, he was never able to sing his poems again.*[2]

Though he had clearly arrived in a state of intense devotion, this first visit did not go smoothly. B. V. Narasimha Swami interviewed Muruganar while he was researching his biography, Self-Realization. *This is what Muruganar told him in February 1930:*

> *Two or three days after my arrival I was given some medicine. I do not know what it was, but it excited me and overpowered me. I sat in front of the Maharshi and concentrated my mind on his person. After a few minutes I had a vision of brightness. It was a suffused brightness all over his body and around it. The body*

[2] This elaboration of the first meeting was given by Muruganar to V. Ganesan, who recorded it in 'Obeisance to the Poet-saint: Muruganar'. See *The Mountain Path*, 1973, pp. 202–3. Verse 1074 of *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai* may be referring to this first meeting:

Venkata [Ramana] whose Being is Bliss
Overflowing and immeasurable,
Came out quick to meet this slave
And far from laughing in contempt,
Took me up and made me his own.
How wonderful his grace!

was, however, distinct from the surrounding light. How long it lasted I do not know, so wholly lost was I in contemplating the vision. Kunju Swami, Dandapani Swami and Arunachala Swami were present while this was going on. Maharshi then appeared to me as Christ, for what reason I cannot say, and again as Mohammed and other great souls for similarly inexplicable reasons. I lost my former personality during this period, for it was submerged and lost in a huge ocean wave of a new state of spirituality. I was feeling that all my experience was dream-like, vague, insubstantial, and mysterious, in spite of the feeling that I was still in the waking condition. I was obsessed by this fear that my former worldly waking state was being smothered and my former self plundered of its sense of reality and individuality. I felt that as a consequence I might be perpetually held down to this strange life in Tiruvannamalai and be forever lost to my mother whose sole support I was.

So I bawled out some words to this effect: 'Here are a band of robbers called siddhas *at whose head is this Ramana Maharshi! They are all intent on capturing souls who approach them in the waking condition and rapidly charming them into this mysterious* siddha's *sort of life and adding them to their group! As it would not be within the power of my mother or anyone else to see me or take me back from their iron clutch, I must start off from here at once!'*

I also added, looking at this bright dazzling figure of Maharshi and addressing him: 'So here I am, unable even for a few moments to endure this light. How wonderful it is that a woman, your mother, should have carried you in her womb for nine long months.'

In this high-strung state, and in this unique strain, I went on haranguing for over an hour, punctuating my remarks by repeated prostrations to Maharshi. After that I wandered about here and there with Kunju Swami and Arunachala Swami, mostly around Pali Tirtham and the Chengam Road until about 3 a.m. I felt that all attempts to escape from the ashram were futile as the whole of Tiruvannamalai was giving me the same

oppressive feeling, submerging my personality. [I felt] that Tiruvannamalai and the Maharshi were co-extensive and synonymous.[3]

A few days later, during the same trip to Tiruvannamalai, when I had no medicine to excite me, I again sat before the Maharshi and had a similar experience. Once again the figure of the Maharshi became brilliant, and my sense of personality was again submerged. Again my fears were roused that should I continue in his presence longer, I should be lost to my mother. So at midnight I hurried from the ashram into the town and spent the night in the house of one of my pupils.

In the succeeding months I came to visit on many occasions. I used to listen to people's queries to the Maharshi and his replies to them. I was gradually

[3] I asked Kunju Swami what he remembered of Muruganar's first visit.

He replied, 'We didn't know what the problem was. He was babbling incoherently and seemed very agitated. Bhagavan asked us to keep an eye on him because he didn't look like he was capable of looking after himself. Bhagavan's *darshan* sometimes had a very dramatic effect on new visitors. We knew that nothing bad could happen to a visitor while he was under Bhagavan's protection, so I wasn't really alarmed by Muruganar's behaviour. He just needed someone to look after him for a few hours till he calmed down.'

It is possible that the 'medicine' that Muruganar was given was *ganja* since there were several *sadhus* who congregated around Bhagavan who regularly took this drug. Bhagavan frequently expressed his disapproval of this behaviour, but it still continued on the fringes of the ashram.

Verse 339 of *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai* seems to refer to this dramatic first visit to Bhagavan:

To those who come to you, O Lord,
Your grace is like the ocean vast.
When I, on service bent, had reached
Your Feet, with smiling face you glanced
At me, and at that moment you
Revealed to my mind's eye
Rare visions, various, wonderful,
Never by man beheld before!

> *influenced by him and my outlook on life was getting altered. After my mother died in 1924 I left my job in July 1926 and I came to Tiruvannamalai, making it my permanent residence in the middle of 1926. I have continued here ever since, and I have now written over a thousand verses about him.*[4]

This account is so excessively self-deprecating, I can only conclude that in the final paragraph Muruganar was deliberately downplaying his experiences and accomplishments.

Muruganar made a second visit to Bhagavan about three months later and on that occasion he also had a vision of Bhagavan surrounded by light. He again had the fear that if he remained at Ramanasramam he would become a sannyasin. *Since he was still very attached to his mother and feared that she would be left without anyone to support her if he abandoned his career to live in Tiruvannamalai, he fled Tiruvannamalai after only one day and returned to Madras. It was on this visit that Bhagavan encouraged him to write poetry using the same style and subject matter that Manikkavachagar had used more than 1,000 years before.* Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai, *one of Muruganar's major works, closely follows the format of the* Tiruvachakam, *Manikkavachagar's most celebrated poetry collection.*

For the next three years Muruganar was a regular visitor to Ramanasramam. He would come whenever he had free time and was so attached to being in Bhagavan's presence, on many occasions he would find it physically impossible to board the return train. He would wait on the platform in the station, watch the train leave, and then return to Ramanasramam. When he was asked about this, he would say that his body could not step onto the train. After this had happened a few times, Bhagavan would send someone to the station with him to force him to get into a carriage.

Though Muruganar, in the account he gave to Narasimha Swami, has little to say about his early years with Bhagavan, there

[4] I discovered this account while I was cataloguing the Sri Ramanasramam archives in the early 1980s. The manuscript was in B. V. Narasimha Swami's handwriting. I doubt that Muruganar himself would have described his first days in Tiruvannamalai in this way had he been prevailed upon to write an account himself. This version was published in *The Mountain Path*, 1981, pp. 84–88.

is another source that adds a new dimension to the story of how he came to be with Bhagavan in Tiruvannamalai. In 1972 Muruganar's wife Meenakshi wrote a brief account of this period of her life:[5]

> *My husband was a tutor to the third Rani's mother in the Ramanathapuram palace. After my marriage he served as Tamil* vidvan *[pandit] in Tirumalai Nayakkar Mahal, Madurai. Then we left that place, came to Rayapuram and settled in Kollava Agraharam. My husband became a Tamil pandit in Northwick School, Rayapuram.*
>
> *In the meantime my father [Dandapani Swami] took* sannyasa *and became one of the leading devotees of Sri Ramana Bhagavan. Later, my father went to Palani with Bhagavan's permission, constructed an ashram in South Giri Street, and lived there for some time. While he was there he came to our house in Rayapuram. During his visit he gave a copy of* Aksharamanamalai *to my husband. My husband went through the verses and after four days informed me that he was going to Tirukkazhu Kunram. However, instead he went straight to Tiruvannamalai.*
>
> *When he saw Bhagavan he felt that his whole body was burning. He wept and cried out, complaining of a burning sensation without knowing what it was. The attendants around Bhagavan thought that he was mad. One attendant, Sri Ramakrishna Swami, rubbed lemon juice on his head and poured pots of water over him.*[6] *He stayed there for several days doing* tapas *and having Bhagavan's* darshan. *He then returned to Madras and his job, but he had little interest in his work.*
>
> *Then he began to go to Tiruvannamalai on all*

[5] I also found this account, written in Tamil, in the Sri Ramanasramam archives. It was published alongside Muruganar's version in *The Mountain Path*, 1981, pp. 84–88.

[6] This is a common village treatment for people who are believed to be insane. Annamalai Swami was given the same treatment in his village because the people there thought that his obsession with God was unhinging his mind. See *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, pp. 12–13.

Saturdays and Sundays for one year. After my mother-in-law's first annual ceremony,[7] *and without informing me, he resigned his job and went to Ramanathapuram. My neighbours telegrammed to my brother about my problem and he came to see me. Both of us went to the school and met the headmistress who was an English lady. She said that he had resigned his job and left. I began to weep and she consoled me by saying that God would help me.*

Then I went to Ramanathapuram with my brother and Muruganar came to visit us the night we arrived. I held his feet and wept. I requested him to point out my faults, if any, that made him leave me alone. He gave me no reply. Then I went to Raghava Iyengar, an associate of Muruganar and a great Tamil scholar in the town, and told him about my troubles. Raghava talked to my husband but his words had no effect.

Then Sri Muruganar left for Tiruvannamalai and after ten days I also went there. Shantammal also came to the ashram. I narrated all my sufferings to Bhagavan and wept, and Bhagavan consoled me. I stayed in the ashram for six months. At that time the ashram was very small. Chinnaswami, Bhagavan, Ramakrishna Swami and Dandapani Swami used to cook. I helped them in the kitchen and it was a very happy time for me.

Daily Bhagavan used to give me ten verses from Muruganar's works and instructed me to recite them to him the following day. I did it regularly. Sometimes I helped Bhagavan in grinding for iddlies, *and so on. Once a week Bhagavan used to go round the hill with Kunju Swami, Dandapani Swami, Ramakrishna Swami, Shantammal and others. I also used to accompany them. We used to recite* Aksharamanamalai *during our* pradakshina.

[7] The first anniversary of her death. Muruganar was very attached to his mother and delayed the renunciation of his worldly life and career until after her death. Two of Muruganar's works have dedications to his mother and he composed a number of verses in which he implored Bhagavan either to cure his mother's various ailments or give her Self-realisation in the same way that he had given his own mother liberation.

Bhagavan never allowed anyone to be idle. All disciples used to sit in meditation with closed eyes in the hall. I did not know how to meditate, and when I mentioned this to Bhagavan, he taught me how to do it. One day I came to the hall with my hair full of flowers and bowed before Bhagavan.

Shantammal saw my decorations and said, 'Your husband has become a sannyasin. *Why do you dress up like this?'*

After hearing this I removed the flowers and I went up to Bhagavan weeping and bowed down before him.

He noticed me and asked, 'Why did you remove all your decorations?'

I said that it was on the advice of Shantammal.

Immediately Bhagavan called Shantammal and asked, 'Why, has she no husband?[8] *Why should she not decorate herself if she wants to? When people come to the ashram and take a ladle in their hand,*[9] *they immediately think that they are wonderful. While I was trying to bring her peace, you have hurt her heart.'*

On one occasion, while others were doing meditation, I was more interested in some coffee that was due to be served.

Bhagavan noticed me, laughed and said, 'Everyone is doing meditation on the Self, but Meenakshi is doing coffee meditation'.

At that moment Saranagathi Ramaswami Iyer, who had come in a bullock cart, entered the hall with coffee and iddlies *and Bhagavan asked him to serve me first.*

Muruganar stayed near the temple in town with Iswara Swamigal and Gopal Rao. They used to go begging for their food at noon. Muruganar used to sit alone in the Subramaniya temple in the evening.

One evening, acting on Shantammal's advice, I

[8] Though Muruganar had left his job, his wife and his home to be with Bhagavan, he did not take *sannyasa*, so Meenakshi had every right to behave as if she were still married. Wives of *sannyasins* would be expected to behave as if they were widowed and not wear flowers or jewellery.

[9] Shantammal was one of a group of brahmin widows who did most of the cooking in the ashram in the 1930s and 40s.

caught hold of Muruganar's feet and asked, 'What mistake have I done? Why did you leave? What will be my future?'

In response he opened neither his mouth nor his eyes.

Soon after this incident someone brought a piece of verse to the hall and put it before Bhagavan.

Bhagavan wanted Muruganar to read it and said, 'Muruganar has been absent for the last two days. What is the reason?'

In response to this I went to Bhagavan and told him what I did at the temple on Shantammal's advice.

Bhagavan got angry with me and said, 'Why did you act like that on that woman's advice? You see, while he was here, you could see your husband. But now he has disappeared, what will you do? Hereafter, don't take other's advice and don't give trouble to Muruganar.'

Then Bhagavan asked Viswanatha Swami and Ramakrishna Swami to search for Muruganar and bring him back. They found him in Skandashram and brought him back to the ashram, telling him that Meenakshi had gone to her village. He came and sat by the side of Bhagavan and I went before Bhagavan and did namaskaram. *Then Bhagavan asked Muruganar why he had run away instead of advising me to do some meditation. Muruganar remained silent.*

Bhagavan picked up a book. I was sitting in a corner and he called to me to come near him.

'Meenakshi, come here. There is a story in this book. I shall read it to you. Listen. Once a husband and wife lived happily for some time. One day her husband disappeared without telling anyone. Many years passed but she could not find him. Eventually she joined a hospital as a nurse. In the same hospital her husband was working as head compounder, but they did not recognise each other. After some time they became close friends and the nurse became pregnant. When her mother came to help her, he saw her and realised that his present wife was the same one whom he had earlier deserted.'

After finishing the story Bhagavan asked, 'Why don't

you act like her?' and everyone in the hall laughed, including me.

One day all the devotees were sitting in the hall. I was in tears again.

Bhagavan asked me, 'Why are you crying again? Did somebody tease you?'

I said, 'No one talked against me, but I thought of my miserable life and the tears just came.'

Bhagavan said, 'Why don't you take my advice. What is there in the family life? See, your father has ten children, but they are not helping him. I am always here with you. Nothing will happen. Don't worry.'

In this way Bhagavan consoled me.

Then he said, 'Go only to the house where you are called affectionately "Meenakshi". The ashram will take care of you."[10]

Another day he called me 'Meenakshi' and gave me ten verses by Muruganar to memorise. In these verses he describes Bhagavan as his bridegroom with Muruganar being his bride. He complains that Bhagavan has left the bride in the streets after marriage without proper care.[11]

One verse says, 'You were once with me, my wedded

[10] I discussed Meenakshi's account with Professor K. Swaminathan, then vice-president of the Delhi Ramana Kendra, in 1980. At that time Professor Swaminathan was bringing out Muruganar's works in Tamil, with financial assistance from the Government of India. He was also translating Muruganar's poems for various Ramanasramam publications. He knew about this promise that had been made by Bhagavan and had consequently arranged for the Delhi Kendra to provide a pension for Meenakshi for as long as she lived.

[11] Verse 873 of *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*:

Then you and I were one alone,
Both one, for ever one,
But then, like some carefree vagabond
Incapable of constant love,
You left me in the street for folk
To laugh and jeer at!
If now I took the liberty
To speak of it, you'd answer straight
That it was but a dream we dreamed!

Lord, but now for a long time you have abandoned me. And if I complain, you call our old friendship a dream that I had dreamt.'

In the version given to me Bhagavan changed the last line, replacing the name Ramana with Muruga. Then he asked me to recite these verses in the hall in the evening while Muruganar was there.

I sang these ten verses in the hall while Muruganar was sitting by the side of Bhagavan.

Bhagavan then told Muruganar, 'I have not left you in the streets, but you have left Meenakshi in the streets'.

Muruganar got up laughing, but Bhagavan asked him to give a reply before getting up, but he went away without saying anything.[12]

Then Bhagavan said, 'I tried in so many ways. It is of no use. God alone will look after you.'

Bhagavan was very kind to me. His grace must be with me for ever.

Bhagavan's attempts to reunite Muruganar and Meenakshi were unsuccessful. Muruganar remained with Bhagavan at Ramanasramam and never went back to being a householder with his wife. Though he never took sannyasa, *Muruganar lived the rest of his life as a* sadhu *and daily went to Tiruvannamalai to beg for his food.*

This insistence on begging was one of the most noticeable aspects of his lifestyle. In the final years of his life, when he lived in Ramanasramam and was venerated by all the devotees who lived there, he still insisted on going for bhiksha, *but instead of begging on the streets of Tiruvannamalai, he would 'beg' at the kitchen door of the Ramanasramam dining room. He would hold out the cloth he wrapped round his shoulders, and one of the kitchen workers would put food into it.*

How can this woman comprehend
Your state mysterious, Ramana,
Master of *maya*, God above!

[12] According to Kanakamma (*Ramana's Muruganar*, p. 38) Bhagavan remarked, before Muruganar had had a chance to leave the hall, 'Why do you leave the place just because it is sung *as "Muruga Mayavan"*? Then should I not follow suit when it is sung as *"Ramana Mayavan"*?'

Muruganar had come to Bhagavan pleading for grace and salvation. Bhagavan's initial response was to tell him to be still and quiet. This upadesa *was brought out in a poem that Muruganar wrote entitled* Irai Pani Nitral, *'Steadfastness in Service'.*

O happy one,
Whichever way I went
I heard your praise
And surrendered to your feet
my body, wealth[13] *and life.*
I cried out, 'Ocean of virtue, mountain-high,
Show me the way to happiness!'
Ramana the just, the majestic, said,
'Stand still. Stay where you are.'

By neither digging nor soaring
Could Vishnu or Brahma find you,[14]
whereas I, trudging towards diverse goals, was worn thin.
I cried out, 'Tell me how to merge in the feet
which are beyond the knowledge of life!'
Ramana, pure and secure, said,
'Be still. Rest as you are.'

[13] Before settling at Sri Ramanasramam, Muruganar sold most of his personal and household belongings and donated the proceeds to the ashram.

[14] This is a reference to the principal Arunachala myth. Vishnu and Brahma were quarrelling about who was the greater. Siva intervened and manifested himself as an infinitely long column of light. He told the two gods that whichever of them could find an end to the column would be deemed to be the greater of the two. Brahma took the form of a swan and tried to fly to the top. Vishnu took the form of a boar and tried to dig his way to the bottom. Neither was successful and both eventually had to admit that Siva was greater than either of them. After they had admitted defeat, Siva was requested to appear, for the benefit of devotees, in a form that was less dazzling. He agreed and manifested as the mountain of Arunachala. The *Arunachala Mahatmyam* states that Siva first appeared as the mountain of Arunachala on *Ardhra Darshanam*, a midwinter festival that traditionally commemorates a famous manifestation of Siva in Chidambaram.

Passing, passing through various births,
driven on and on by the force of karma,
I cried, 'Show me the way, my friend, my Master!
Show me the way to reach you!'
Ramana, the Lord of wisdom and welfare, replied,
'Don't be angry, don't be glad.
Gather your mind to oneness
And be guided by the grace of the Lord.'

Like a picture sprawling on a paper,
Without roots I spread in all directions
and cried, 'Tell me how to cut through the surface!'
Ramana, the Master of wisdom, said,
'Like a flame in a pitcher,
burn steadily and brightly in the grace of the Lord.
Be still. Fulfil his will.'

I cried out, 'Lord and Master, tell me how
To make good deeds prevail
Against deluding evil deeds!'
My dear father, my Ramana, said,
'Stand untroubled in the centre.
Move only as you may be moved
By the grace of the Lord.'

I cried out, 'Mighty Master of works,
Creating, preserving, destroying,
tell me the way to salvation!'
Ramana, the wise and virtuous one replied,
'Watch word and thought
and walk as you are guided
by the grace of the Lord who dwells
in the lotus of your Heart'.

I cried out, 'How to end
the strong inveterate deeds
that torment me and force me back
into the torrid current of births!'
Ramana, best and brightest of teachers, answered,
'Walking the straight path fixed of old,
join and be enjoined by
the grace of the Lord of joyous awareness'.

I cried out, 'O rain cloud pregnant with compassion!
Teach me fully the trick
Of escaping alive from the flood of births.'
Ramana, Lord of wisdom and welfare, said,
'Neither like nor loathe the true or the false.
Stand in the centre and be
Impelled by the grace of the Lord.'

I cried out, 'All forms I see are forms of you.
As none of the gods know you aright,
Tell me decisively what to do.'
Ramana, Lord of wisdom and welfare, replied,
'There is a way to escape
the hungry current of births,
and to reach the shore and be safe.
Join and be one with
The grace of the Lord.'

I cried out, 'Best of Masters! You who shone
In the kurunda *tree's cool shade*
To teach your devotee from Vadavur![15]
Fully and clearly lay bare to me
The secret of Self-knowledge.'
Replied Ramana, my father, my king,
'Be as you are, your Self!'[16]

After an initial period of residence in the Arunachaleswara Temple, Muruganar moved to Palakottu, the sadhu *colony adjacent to Ramanasramam. The following story dates from this period:*

Bhagavan used to say that begging for alms was a good antidote for the ego. Muruganar laid great stress on purity. His clothes, including the ones used for bhiksha, *would be spotlessly clean. Before eating the food brought*

[15] This is a reference to Manikkavachagar whose home town was Vadavur. Siva appeared to Manikkavachagar under a *kurunda* tree, accepted him as his disciple, looked at him, and through his divine gaze established him in the Self.

[16] *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, vv. 967–76.

> *by alms, Muruganar would keep washing his hands and feet with sand in the tank at Palakottu. This would take quite a while. Sometimes the monkeys which abounded there at that time would eat his food and he would have to go hungry. Noticing this predicament of Muruganar, Sabapathy Pillai, the priest of the Ganesh Temple there, invited Muruganar to stay with him and persuaded him to do so.*[17]

Muruganar's obsession with cleanliness was legendary. One of his students, Padma Venkataraman, has noted that he would use four full buckets of water just to wash his hands, feet and teeth.[18] *The same attitude was manifested when he was asked to take charge, temporarily, of the* pujas *in the Mother's* samadhi:

> *He would be rubbing the* lingam *so that there would not be any trace of oil from the* abhishekam... *Next, he would endlessly clean the area.*
>
> *While watching him do the worship Bhagavan humorously remarked, 'The way you are rubbing the* lingam, *it would wear away in no time. The* lingam *itself would disappear!'*[19]

Though Bhagavan had openly criticised him for the way he was treating his wife Meenakshi,[20] *Bhagavan did recognise that Muruganar was an advanced devotee who was ready for an experience of the Self. At some point – Muruganar never mentions exactly when, but it is assumed to be soon after his arrival in*

[17] *Ramana's Muruganar*, p. 8.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 49.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 30.

[20] When Muruganar was once cutting spinach with Bhagavan in the kitchen, he managed to do the job so badly, Bhagavan remarked, 'The way you have cut the vegetables is no better than the way you managed your house'.

Soon afterwards Muruganar wrote the following verse (*Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, v. 863) and gave it to Bhagavan:

Why are you, O Ramana,
A naked beggar crying out

Tiruvannamalai – Bhagavan answered Muruganar's pleas for grace by directing his divine look at him. Under Bhagavan's penetrating gaze Muruganar lost his worldly delusions and found himself restored to his natural state of Self-awareness. As Muruganar wrote many years later, 'He forgave me my misdeeds and made good my imperfections'.[21]

Muruganar has described the spiritual dimension of this event in thousands of his verses, but in remarkably few of them does he give any hint of the physical circumstances in which this momentous encounter took place.[22] *In verse 255 of* Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai *Muruganar does mention that it took place in Palakottu. Elsewhere in the same work, in a poem entitled 'Keerti Tiruvahaval', there is a brief, tantalising description of what happened on that decisive occasion:*

> *He took me to the forest with him on the pretext of plucking leaves to make leaf-plates. There, with great delight, he destroyed my mind's restlessness by bestowing his glance on me. In the middle of the night he subdued my divided individual consciousness, granting me the experience of the undivided reality.*

The following selection of verses, written many years after the event, all look back in awesome wonder to this momentous experience of grace.

For alms and roaming here and there?
Why not seek the company
Of a nice young lady and so start
Straightway a decent household life?

Muruganar, writing in jest, thought that Bhagavan's extreme fastidiousness in the kitchen was more suitable to a married householder than a 'naked beggar'. Bhagavan himself roared with laughter when he was shown the verse. (*Ramana's Muruganar*, p. 23.)

[21] *Sri Ramana Anubhuti*, v. 233.

[22] There are many accounts of Muruganar's life that state that this awakening took place on the day that he first met Bhagavan. In the light of Muruganar's own account, which I have already given, I find this point of view unsupportable. Muruganar's description of his first visit is not the account of a man who has been graced by an experience of the Self.

***Sri Ramana Anubhuti* [*Sri Ramana Experience*][23]**

8 I have ended the confusion of my bewildered, suffering mind. A lowly cur, I have merged with the gracious feet of my Master. In the surging brilliance of his divine wisdom's splendour the broad ocean of deadly desires has disappeared completely.

9 The dark prison which bound my tortured soul crumbled and I became his servant, finding joyous life in the open sky of his ambrosial grace. The knot which locked my spirit to my physical body was sundered by the bright sword of my Master's glance and was no more.

12 I was a learned fool. My flawed mind knew nothing till I came to dwell with Him whose glance filled my heart with the light of awareness. Dwelling in that gracious state of peace, whose nature is holy silence, so hard to gain and know, I entered into union with the deathless state of the knowledge of reality.

13 As the deadly delusion of a body-bound ego faded, a flower of pure light unfolded at his holy feet. That radiance grew ever brighter with my love until I realised the flawless knowledge of the Self, manifesting as the unbroken awareness 'I-I' within my heart.

15 He became one with my very soul, the Supreme Lord, the flawless *Brahman*, the life of all that is, the jewel of the Self, turning my soul's night to day with the fulsome rays of true wisdom's sun.

16 The confusion of the senses ended and the world's illusion was dispelled as grace's bright sun rose, absorbing me in itself and obliterating all distinctions. And as I entered the light of a life lived in the holy silence of the glorious non-dual state, the

[23] *Sri Ramana Anubhuti* was first published in 1948, more than twenty years after Muruganar had the experiences he is describing. Even so, the experience he had and the gratitude he feels towards Bhagavan are still uppermost in his mind. The translations are by Robert Butler.

'I' and all that arises from it subsided and dissolved away.

18 I was wandering deluded in the mind's labyrinth of dreams, rushing hither and thither, desiring one thing then another until the joy of union with the Lord welled up within me. My body merged into the infinite light of divine wisdom and my heart was filled with a deep inner tranquillity.

23 Corrupted by the senses' defilement, yet was I drawn by the light of the Self which shone in your eyes so that I conceived a great love for you. With melting heart, like a cow with a young calf, I remain a supplicant at your feet, which hold the reward of final liberation.

25 Unquenchable, the lamp of grace and true knowledge burns at his holy feet. Through his gentle smile, where grace's flower blooms, I have renounced and abandoned the ties of kith and kin and I have placed myself beneath those bounteous feet, grasping them closely.

27 He is the teacher of the eternal law through whose glance the truth unfolded, filling my heart with the dazzling radiance of his blissful consummate grace, so that the body, ego and intellect were all no more. I became merged in the divine silence, which is the abiding knowledge of Lord Siva.

28 A noble lion, he fixed the victorious gaze of true knowledge upon the rutting elephant of my ego, which was drunk with self-conceit, filling me with the sweet nectar of union with Lord Siva, so that the inner experience of divine wisdom became my whole existence.

29 I was bound for destruction through my disastrous attachment to the world's illusory reality until, under my fair Lord's gracious gaze, my understanding was flooded with the delightful experience of Lord Siva's bliss, and I entered a new life in the boundless realm of holy silence.

32 Through the light of enquiry into the nature of the Self, which is true spiritual practice, and through the precious words of my teacher, who is established in the state of holy silence

wherein liberation has its origin, my soul has tasted the nectar of union with Lord Siva in the state of bliss beyond duality, merging into the all-transcending oneness of his grace.

38 Deeply absorbed in the state of holy silence which reality's perfect light illumines, filled with the exaltation of the non-dual state, my consciousness merged with the Lord and I became one with Him, winning the greatest reward of all, to dwell in final bliss, beyond birth and death.

39 As the struggle between desire and aversion came to an end, I ceased to invoke in mere words 'the one true Godhead', and as the light of the reality which is truly sublime grew ever brighter within my heart, I attained that state of grace, which is to dwell unwearyingly in holy silence.

40 My poor helpless mind was swept along in the swirling torrent of objective phenomena until my Lord guided my deluded understanding into the broad calm of his holy silence so that the light of his majesty shone in my heart.

42 My divine Lord and grace-bestowing Guru replaced the loathsome darkness of my mind's delusion with the clear light of divine knowledge so that my understanding overflowed with praise to his glorious reality.

43 Light of lights, graciously he plunged me into the ocean of divine love at his holy feet so that I tasted the sweetness of final bliss with which I could not be sated. Origin and source of my understanding, the spreading radiance of his true teaching rushed forth in all directions until within my heart it united with my very being.

44 Through the power of his feet, gracious beacons of unconditional knowledge, he pierced my desolate existence to the core, and when his noble gaze fell upon me, spreading the unfailing light of Sivahood all about, I experienced the incomparable bliss of authentic being.

48 Transporting me into a realm of pure bliss, the vision of the authentic Self expanded within my heart and I attained the state

of grace whose essence is love. Then, in the state of holy silence, bliss and love merged together into realisation of the one true reality, which is the experience of Lord Siva.

49 In holy silence at his flawless feet, thinking, yet beyond the realm of thought, I established in my heart that consciousness wherein his self and mine were one. The confusion of eye and mind, born of treacherous desire, died away, its falsehood revealed, and amidst grace's honeyed flood, divine reality was all.

50 I read the scriptures but my mind could not grasp their meaning. It was only through the gracious intervention of my wise teacher and Master, working inwardly, that his own state of unbroken meditation became permanent within me and my heart was penetrated and held in reality's eternal grasp.

53 Without dissimulation he revealed to us through the absolute purity of his grace that infinite state of pure consciousness, manifesting as a radiant expanse of light within our hearts, so that, sitting at the feet of the Creator, with no one to give and no one to receive, we enjoyed the union we so eagerly sought.

54 He is my Master, manifesting as the light of true knowledge, whose nature is love, and that same knowledge is the means by which I worship him, so that in my heart, as knowledge and love merge indistinguishably into holy silence, my true nature stands revealed.

56 It was fitting that he should accept me into his holy company and fitting that I, for my part, should approach him as a loving devotee. Through that fair union, as I became one with him, he bestowed upon me the glory of liberation, whose attribute is realisation in holy silence.

57 Languishing in the slough of my soul's defilement, I knew not a single moment of clear understanding until my Lord revealed to me my own self as *Brahman*, and as the light of grace shone forth from his fair feet, graciously bestowing the supreme bliss of holy silence, all was illuminated by the magnificence of his mind, voice and form.

59 Through the ever-present treasure of his grace within my heart, my life became free of the suffering caused by the humiliating bonds of the world and the soul. And as the ruinous effects of my former deeds were consumed like cotton in a flame, my spirit attained the highest bliss, which is to dwell with my Master in that state of grace.

61 The pure eternal state of grace beyond the taint of mind flared up within my heart, spreading through my entire physical form. The reward I gained was the experience of the self as *Brahman* and the victory I won was to vanquish the bitter suffering of birth and death.

63 A poor sinner gripped by the bonds of excessive desire, I was deluded by my ruinous attachment to the pleasures of the senses, but when he conferred upon me the bliss of his true knowledge, all delusion was dispelled. Dwelling thus as one with Sri Ramana is nothing less than union with Lord Siva.

64 Exposing the vast expanse of the heavenly realm as mere illusion, and the entire world known to the senses as false, the 'I' shone forth as the supreme Self, ruling over me and revealing to me the goal of the Guru's mantra.

66 The Lord bathed me in the light of my own inner realisation so that the mental trickery that bound me to a world of illusion was exposed. Then, as all desires and the thoughts that gave rise to them fell away, the glory of his holy feet was all that remained, radiating peace and graciously shedding the light of his true teaching all about me.

68 My mind extinguished, I am his devotee, meditating upon his ruby feet, which bestow the grace of the Self, whose nature is pure knowledge. The supreme bliss of realisation arising in the sweet nectar of holy silence has established itself within my heart as eternal freedom from birth and death.

71 Through my erroneous identification with my ego, which was filled with desires through my false understanding of the nature of the soul and the world, I remained enmeshed in the web of birth and death. But when I attained the blessed state of

grace, wherein I was embraced by the supreme bliss of realisation of the Self, my heart entered the realm of sublime majesty.

75 He saved me, his humble devotee, from destruction, bringing me to salvation through his own ambrosial being, even as I languished in the dark night of my mind's deadly delusion. Then indeed did the holy feet of my noble Master, bestowing his grace in holy silence, become immovably established within my heart, illuminating my inner being with the golden light of true spiritual practice.

77 Showing me the light of his true teaching, his holy feet drove out the ruinous ignorance that, like a dark cloud, defiled my soul with its corruption. Revealing to me in all its clarity the truth whose nature is liberation, he joyfully filled my heart with the bliss of his profound peace.

79 Through the victorious experience of true realisation's full glory, the confusion caused by my soul's defilement disappeared completely. Then indeed did a tide of deep peace, which my heart could not contain, well up and spread within me, and as the flood increased, desire's thirst was quenched at last.

80 As love for my Master grew to fill my consciousness, the blissful realisation of Lord Siva, like sweetest ambrosia, swept me up in its flood. Then, as I became established in that same true awareness, the light of liberation shone out with a steady radiance within my heart.

81 His gracious gaze entered my heart, bestowing the knowledge of Lord Siva in all its fullness. All the petty cares of my erring mind, along with the fears they bring with them, disappeared completely, and as that false awareness of a personal self which gives rise to the multifarious and bewildering world of appearances vanished, a new life for me began at his holy feet.

83 As I waited nervously, weeping and distraught, on the threshold of his grace-bestowing divine presence, my Master cut away the worldly desires which so tormented me, and there, beneath his bounteous foot, I received a noble gift, the realisation of the true knowledge of Lord Siva.

84 The Lord graciously manifested as my Guru, eradicating the bondage of my deluded cravings. Revealing to me the glory of his feet, driving out all my desires, he ruled over me, so that in my soul only he remained. The joy of reflecting upon my deep affection for him never leaves my heart.

85 Seeking sanctuary I took shelter at his feet, and he, through his silent presence, bade me henceforth fear no more. From that day on, through that authentic union in which he became ineradicably established within my heart, my life has been filled with a child-like happiness and profound joy.

87 Abolishing the deep attachment which sent me wandering in pain from birth to birth, he revealed to me the state of liberation which is my own birthright, and what is more, he charged my voice with poetry so that, unworthy as I was, I was able through his grace to speak of his true wisdom even before the learned, as if I were goddess Saraswati[24] herself.

88 A poor devotee, I fell into evil ways through the mean quality of my petty mind, but when the experience of the true knowledge of the Self welled up within my heart, thought melted away in the spreading radiance of holy silence and he showed me the radiance of his bliss, eternal and all transcending.

92 There was no good in me. I was no better than a dog, but when my Master looked upon me, an intense longing for him arose which penetrated my heart and became established there, and as the suffering born of the illusion of separateness abated, the deep peace of a realisation which knows no bounds shone forth, graciously bestowing the wisdom of the Self.

93 My heart was sunk in the sleep of delusion and my self-obsessed mind swept up in a whirlwind of dreams so that the great glory of his true nature was hidden from me until he revealed it in all its majestic splendour. Such is the compassion of my Lord and God.

[24] The goddess of learning.

94 Difficult indeed would it be for me to express the lofty nature of the Lord's compassion other than by sinking into the radiant inner quietude of holy silence beneath his gracious feet so that my Father's own divine majesty might become manifest in me.

97 Bidding me behold and embrace him without a second's delay, my Lord and Master became inwardly one with me, absorbing me into the great ocean of his own Self. The realisation that consists of the merging of consciousness into that Self was established ineradicably within me and I began a new life, sharing his divine nature.

100 'Experiencing the profound bliss of his nature which knows no taint, I will bathe in the glorious radiance of his grace.' Such was the clear silent understanding through which he conferred his enlightenment upon me. To my soul, the love of my true father is indeed sweeter than the nectar of the gods.

101 In the parched desert of my sinful life I groaned in agony, trembling with fear, until my Lord put an end to my suffering and revealed to me in the sight of men that state of grace which even the gods cannot know.

102 Delighting my gaze he showed me his feet which graciously bestow true knowledge. No one can reach and know them through the contentious ego with its endless convolutions, but only through his grace, when the mind is delivered up to be subdued by the power of those holy feet.

103 As the gracious light of inner realisation entered my heart, all knowledge acquired through learning was exposed as merely a creation of the mind, and as it fell away, my futile habitual mode of awareness, in which I did not cleave to the unconditional glory of the Self, ripened triumphantly into true knowledge.

104 The shadowy creations of my deluded mind, filled with desire and worthy only of reproach, faded as the Lord's divine grace welled up within me. And for my thoughts, there remains no object other than the glory of the Self where I dwell in awe and wonder.

105 My mind's activity along with my ego subsided and fell into total abeyance so that no object of thought existed within my consciousness. Then, in that overflowing emptiness, did I experience the goal of the Self, eternal and ever present, as my own true goal.

106 Entirely banishing lust and all the rest,[25] my gracious Lord, Guru Ramana, true wisdom's flame, watches over me. Through his glance alone he revealed to me that upsurge of divine love, sweet like the rich juice of a ripe mango, which is the bliss of Lord Siva's blessing.

107 Ocean of compassion, he took pity on this poor ignorant fool and through his grace, cleansing the evil from my heart, he established the supreme reality there. Even the final cataclysm at the universe's end could not dislodge his radiant feet from that place.

109 He it is who is eternally one with myself in the state of one-pointedness, who holds me in his grip like a magnet, who is not separated from me by so much as an atom. And, as the vanity of the 'I am the body' fades and is no more, it is his presence that illumines my heart with the teaching of the indivisible Self.

110 Through his glance he united me with himself, false and deluded knave that I am, and he now dwells illustrious within my heart of hearts. In holy silence, as the experience of the immaculate Self, like sweetest nectar, overwhelms me in its flood, my life has reached fulfilment.

112 Holding me in liberation's final embrace, my Guru's holy feet light up my heart, graciously bestowing the knowledge of the Self. Awakened through his divine power, I have attained strength and clarity of mind so that the false desires that held me in the illusion of worldly bondage have vanished like a dream.

[25] There is a standard list of six great enemies: lust, anger, miserliness, delusion, pride and jealousy.

116 Lost in the fruitless round of birth and death I surrendered before my Master and my sins were cleansed by his gracious gaze. Holding to the path of his holy feet my deadly vices dissolved in the light of my devotions and I merged with the nature of the real.

120 Through my Master's gracious revelation, seeking deep within myself, I knew that it was pure falsehood to claim that the state of self-forgetfulness in which thought diversifies, giving rise to the pairs of opposites, could be inherent in the lofty condition of pure, non-dual consciousness.

123 The nature of his grace, conferred through the bliss of divine silence, was such that it established in me an unshakeable devotion that I experienced as a deep love for my Lord, a love in which my bondage was ended and my mind dissolved in the limitless expanse of the Supreme Self.

124 Setting me on the straight path of true knowledge he led me to the glorious goal of union with him in the one-pointed state of holy silence. My heart's gracious jewel, true wisdom's sun, he dissipated the dark clouds of the senses' illusory world.

126 When the Lord's gracious gaze fell upon me, my heart was filled with the Self's divine radiance in which all distinctions are obliterated so that my evil and treacherous ego faded in the spreading glory of divine realisation's dawn, and was no more.

127 Gladly he ruled me, true wisdom's flame, and now within my heart where in joy I made for him a home I can perceive no other. Only he remains, the Supreme Self, manifesting as consciousness' pure light, empty and yet replete.

128 Those who perform penances, refusing all sustenance, are called great men, but never once did I refuse food with its six flavours. Yet no sooner had his feet entered my heart, delighting my eyes with their blissful sight, than I fell at once into a state where my penance became continuous without any effort on my part.

132 Through the knowledge granted to me by the Lord I came

to realise that the reality that lies beyond the mind is my own true nature. In that state the objective knowledge which dominated my fevered mind dissolved and fell away, and in holy silence the fire of a pure realisation, transcending duality, was kindled within me.

133 Subduing and bringing me under his control, he drew my consciousness to himself with the irresistible magnet of his grace. From the profound depths of his holy silence his gracious glance cut away my ego's ruinous cravings in an instant. How great is the power of his piercing gaze!

136 Even as I grieved over my own lack of worth, he revealed to me the infinite heaven of his grace, purifying me with his limitless and all-pervading light. The delusion of a personal self was swept away and in that clear awareness my existence became one with Lord Siva.

137 The holy state of grace has become established within my heart. The false 'I' of my personal self, which arises through lack of attention, has vanished. And as the deadly ocean of wicked desires was drained, I entered that state of clear awareness, which is to be one with Lord Siva.

138 A blissful emptiness invaded my heart as he caused me to experience in holy silence the bliss of his divine grace, proffering me his holy feet, and with them the eternal truth of the Self. I am left without even the power of thought to reflect upon this.

139 The Lord filled me with the radiance of his own Self, established within my heart, so that I was left quite without the power of thought. Separate from nothing and dependent on nothing, my true nature is to abide in the profound wisdom of that Self.

141 Dwelling as the Supreme Self, whose nature is inherently free of all becoming, that unique reality became established within my heart as my own true nature and my personal self was totally annihilated in him.

142 Through the arrogance of the body-bound ego my mind

rushed hither and thither until it was irrevocably defeated as my consciousness merged into that glorious eternally blissful state of unbroken awareness, which is the boundless realm of the one true Self.

143 Established in the highest awareness which is of the nature of the indivisible Self and which is free of a discriminating consciousness based on discursive thought, my mind's illusory cravings have ceased and that enervated state dominated by desire and aversion has come to a final end.

146 As the natural confusion caused by sinful and injurious desires ceased and everywhere, all about me, my true blissful nature became manifest, I was enfolded by the glorious light of the true and exalted Self, the reality of which is the foundation of all things and is known as *Sadasiva* [the being of Siva].

148 He is the holy one who entered my inner being, holding me in thrall through his compassion so that I dwelt at his feet, devoting myself to his service. His will, shining within me, became one with my own and my ego-self subsided, driven from my heart by true meditation, which is to be one with him.

150 So deserving of devotion, he is the Lord in whom true knowledge is embodied. Through his nature I attained an awareness which is the clear, bright and unadulterated expression of his love. And it is that loving awareness that opened up my inner being, eradicating the desire and aversion caused by the soul's identification with the body, so that the bondage of the world's impurity faded and was no more.

151 Through his gaze he bathed me in the rising flood of his grace, revealing to me the glory of the Self so that the stain of my imprisoned soul's defilement was washed away. Bringing my existence to ample fulfilment by restoring it to its true nature, he has become one with me, dwelling within my heart and filling me with his light.

153 'Transforming yourself into the pure gold of realisation through spiritual practice, be still at my gracious feet and let your troubles be ended.' As he spoke these words an exalted

state of awareness grew and came to fruition within me in which I experienced the truth of the *Upanishads* and vedic hymns.

155 Abandoning totally any other refuge or support, I have placed myself at the feet of my *Sadguru* who lavishes on me more, much more than a mother's love. And so, as my false ego-based awareness, which wandered lost amidst the world's objective phenomena, faded and disappeared, I became merged into the all-encompassing oneness of his grace.

156 Through my deep yearning I discovered him within my heart. As the holy state of grace opened up into the fulfilment of the real, he bestowed on me the blessed state of divine contemplation that is his teaching, and his peace transformed my consciousness into itself.

157 Through his gracious teaching he abolished the desires that clouded my mind with delusion, engendering in my consciousness the infinite fulfilment of authentic being. And thus, in holy silence, the river of my soul ran true at last, filled with the waters of the experience of the supreme ineffable Lord Siva.

158 Through the glorious wisdom of his all-transcending nature, which graciously granted me the attainment of final bliss, free of all mental confusion, I entered a place where all actions, whether of thought, word or deed, are no more: the realm of holy silence.

164 In glory, severing bondage's knot, my Master fixed his gaze upon me, establishing his grace once and for all within my heart. And as the bliss of true knowledge suffused me, that ego-bound knowledge, filled with desires that bring suffering in their wake, was abolished completely.

165 As the glory of his eternal teaching suffused my understanding with bliss, abolishing the demonic 'I' sense which brings with it the delusion of separateness, I obtained the blessed reward of his holy feet where, in holy silence, resides the ineffable reality which is the import of all the *Vedas*.

166 Through the blessing of your true knowledge, perceiving

without distinction myself in you and you in myself, I have come to know within my heart Selfhood's fair and undivided form. How then shall I praise you when you are fully one with me?

169 Bestowing upon me, through his compassionate glance, his wisdom, which is like a diamond, hard and bright, my Lord, Guru Ramana, graciously accepted my surrender. And as the black cloud of ruinous self-delusion, which wore my body's form as a cloak, melted away, I perceived the precious jewel of my own true form.

172 Gaining a new life, I spent it singing praises to the lofty truth of his glorious name, albeit in feeble words of little worth. But my Lord did not deem my hymns unworthy.[26] Embracing me in the outpouring of his affection, with more than a mother's love, he banished my deadly delusion and made me his servant.

[26] On one occasion Bhagavan happened to overhear some people in the ashram making disparaging remarks about Muruganar.

He at once remarked, 'The very day that *Sannidhi Murai* and *Guru Vachaka Kovai* came out, Muruganar became one among the very foremost of devotees'.

In commenting on this statement Michael James (*Ramana's Muruganar*, p. 93) has stated: 'By the words "the very foremost devotees" Sri Bhagavan was referring to [poet] saints such as Appar, Sundarar, Sambandhar, Manikkavachagar...'

This interesting interpretation finds support in a verse Bhagavan himself composed in the following circumstances.

Shortly before *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai* was published, a manuscript version was being read out to Bhagavan. A devotee, Viswanatha Swami, spontaneously exclaimed, in appreciation, 'Mugavapuri Murugan'. Mugavapuri is another name of Ramanathapuram, the birthplace of Muruganar. Bhagavan then challenged Viswanatha to compose his own verse, beginning with these two words. When Viswanatha was unable to do so, he asked Bhagavan to compose the verse himself. Bhagavan responded with the following lines. They were composed as if Muruganar himself was the poet and they followed Muruganar's own particular style of poetry:

> 'Arunachala Ramana, who dwells on the heart-lotus, smiled and looked fixedly, poured forth grace in abundance and completely annihilated my soul.' Singing in this way, so

173 When I perceived the Self manifesting in his radiant form, fulfilling my heart's deepest yearning, I was humbled by the full flood of his grace which cleansed me of obscuring desires, and as my ego fell away, I bowed my head in profound humility.

175 Beneath my Guru's gaze my heart was emptied of guile so that the false understanding that had usurped my heart disappeared completely, and there, in silence at his holy feet, the pure ocean of the Self, which nothing can contain, swept me into the deep bliss of the absolute Godhead.

182 The disordered and chaotic world created by my deluded mind's endless modifications ended when, through his grace, I entered the harmonious condition of authentic being and found my true place, merging with his holy feet which bestow the clear understanding of true knowledge.

184 For there will henceforth be neither pain nor pleasure now that I have experienced love at my good Lord's gracious feet. The desires, which attended that illusory existence lived on the level of the flawed and untrustworthy mind, have ceased and my own essential self has become one with the supreme.

186 There are those who bear the marks of the highest maturity, but even they will fail to perceive the way to salvation and must suffer accordingly unless they seek illumination from an enlightened Master and realise the truth. It is the *Sadguru* alone who can cut away the fetters of the world and the soul.

187 No matter that we read the truth in holy books, no matter how many vows we keep, it is only with the help of the *Sadguru* that we can conquer our confusion. Although I was a sinner, impure in mind, he established me in his own state and showed

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that the people of the world might be saved, Mugavapuri Murugan composed *Sannidhi Murai*, which is equal to *Tiruvachakam*.

The *Tiruvachakam*, Manikkavachagar's *magnum opus*, is one of the most famous and widely admired collections of Tamil devotional poetry. In this one verse Bhagavan gave a public confirmation of two things: Muruganar's elevated spiritual status and his right to be ranked alongside the all-time greats of Tamil poetry.

forbearance, accepting my homage and becoming my Lord.

195 Through the virtuous state of absorption wherein he dwells in holy silence as the Self alone, he came and made me his devotee. In that moment this whole world became as nothing to me and I entered into a fitting union with him who dwells as 'That'.

196 Becoming established in the clarity of true knowledge I, his humble servant, have attained to the consummate state of holy silence. Abandoning the ego I have forsaken all company other than that of the Self, whose glorious nature is none other than my own.

197 Dwelling in the thought-free state of holy silence I experienced the true knowledge in all its clarity and in the dawn of the real I entered a new life filled with tranquillity. At his holy feet, becoming immersed in his peace, I took as my own form that which is beyond bondage and liberation, the Absolute of Absolutes.

198 Attaining a vision beyond the reach of sight and an awareness more subtle than the tiniest atom, I have become established in the absolute reality of the Self. And thus my mind has merged with the supreme in which there is no going, no coming, no connection with anything whatsoever. Seeing itself in all that is, its separation has come to an end.

200 My heart was filled with that holy silence in which the Self is fully manifest as that profound reality whose nature is consciousness. And the peace which I experienced in that gracious state of pure awareness was transformed into love for him.

202 When I became worthy of experiencing that reality whose nature is oneness, and therefore cannot be described, the confused state in which my mind was divided by the duality of good and evil was ended and my existence was suffused by the real.

221 As long as my heart was not filled with the divine blessing

of love and true knowledge bestowed in silence, I was like a noisy drum, beating out my message in words. But through the compassion of my saviour, who has the power to confer the final state of total transcendence through his grace, I entered into the deathless state of silent absorption in him.

226 He revealed to me the transcendent truth so that I came to dwell in holy silence at his feet, bathing again and again in the sacred waters of divine awareness until my heart was pure and refreshed, and as the flame of bliss flared up within me, all my bitter suffering came to an end.

233 He forgave me my misdeeds and made good my imperfections. Through the grace of the Self which shines within the heart, cleansing it of its fundamental corruption, he gave me the gift of a greater life lived in the real. He is the Lord to whom I cling as my true support, abandoning all other attachments.

235 He is my teacher, the supreme Godhead, whilst, as for me, I am not worthy of sitting at the feet of such a Master. And yet through the power of his gracious gaze I was able to offer him my devotion and remain in unbroken communion with him.

238 Surrounded by desires that led me astray, my heart was hardened and my understanding was tricked by the illusion of a personal self. But now that the power of that delusive ego has dissolved at the bounteous feet of my great Master, my divine spouse, I will devote my life to the service of those who serve those holy feet.

241 Hail to the Lord who nourished me with the delicious ambrosia of the eternal teaching of *Sadasiva*, who through his love refreshed my heart, banishing my deluded attachment to land ownership, wealth and women, who looked upon me through the Self's gracious eye and, entering my soul, made it part of him!

Guru Vachaka Kovai

In the late 1920s Muruganar began to record the verbal teachings

that Bhagavan was giving out to visitors and devotees. These upadesas *were recorded by Muruganar in the form of Tamil verses. When a sufficient number had been collected, they were arranged in thematic order. Bhagavan went through this collection of his statements very carefully, making innumerable changes and corrections. In the early 1980s I found a proof copy of the first edition in the Ramanasramam archives that Bhagavan himself had extensively corrected and reworked. In addition to making these corrections, Bhagavan also composed new verses that he added at appropriate places in the text.*[27]*. The entire work was published in Tamil under the title* Guru Vachaka Kovai, *meaning 'A Collection Of The Guru's Sayings'.*

Many readers of books on Bhagavan will be familiar with a translation of this work by Professor K. Swaminathan. It was serialised in The Mountain Path *over many years and was eventually published in its entirety in 1992. This translation tried to bring out the poetry of the original verses as well as the profound meaning. In making my own selection for this chapter I have utilised a different, unpublished translation by Sadhu Om*[28] *and Michael James, but I have subsequently modified many of the verses to improve the clarity of the English. Since all these verses began as verbal replies by Bhagavan, I have attempted to cast the sentences in such a way that they sound like spoken teachings.*

In the Sadhu Om and Michael James version, the poetry of the original verses is sacrificed for greater accuracy in translation. I think this is a reasonable position to take since most non-Tamilian devotees will be more interested in what Bhagavan actually said, rather than how Muruganar rendered his words into Tamil poetry. There are three main divisions of verses in Guru Vachaka Kovai: *The Quest, Continued Practice, and Experience Of Reality. The selection I have chosen comes from the second section, Continued*

[27] There are twenty-eight of Bhagavan's verses interpolated in various places in the text. They are identified by having a 'B' prefix. Muruganar's own verses only have numbers.

[28] Muruganar nominated Sadhu Om to be his literary executor, saying that he was the only person who fully understood his works. Sadhu Om brought out a Tamil edition of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* in 1971 in which he gave simple Tamil prose renderings of all the verses. When I spoke to Professor Swaminathan about this edition in the 1980s, he said that the true meaning of many of the verses only became clear to him after he had read this prose rendering.

Practice. It is preceded by a few of Muruganar's introductory verses.

Prefatory Verses

3 The perfect *jnana* Guru ably and precisely presents the correct meaning in many contradictory statements and passes apt judgement over various discussions, revealing the one Supreme Truth that lies in harmony among them all. May my head rest beneath his feet.

4 This clear light of Supreme Truth was not lit by my innocent, infant mind, which has not seen the truth. It was lit by the fully ripened Supreme Knowledge of my Master, Sri Ramana.

5 Many instructions to root out ignorance were given by my beloved, eternal companion, whose real form is that which exists, shines and reveals itself as 'I'. I now recount some of these instructions that my mind has grasped and preserved.

10 When they are examined, it will be found that these sweet verses comprising *The Collection of the Guru's Sayings* have not been composed by my dull and deluded thinking mind. They have been inspired without thought by the divine Venkatavan [Bhagavan].

48 The Secret of Action

B11 The mere enquiry 'To whom are these defects, these actions, this lack of devotion, this separation from God and this ignorance?' is itself karma, *bhakti,* yoga and *jnana.* When enquired into, 'I' and these [defects] are non-existent. The truth is, we ever remain as the Self.[29]

703 The essence of karma [action] is to know the truth of oneself by enquiring 'Who am I, the one who begins to do activities?'

[29] The four traditional approaches to realisation – karma yoga, *bhakti,* yoga and *jnana* – all presuppose a practitioner who does something to gain a goal. Bhagavan is saying here, and in some of the subsequent verses, that successful self-enquiry eliminates the both the practitioner and the need to practise.

Unless the performer of actions, the ego, is annihilated through enquiry, the perfect peace of supreme bliss, which is the result of karma yoga, cannot be achieved.

704 He who has known the truth of himself, he alone is the one who has performed all the prescribed [religious] activities without fail. For other than the supreme bliss, what fruit is to be achieved by the hard *tapas* of daily performing these activities with great care?

705 Since the flawless non-dual knowledge alone shines as the goal of the observance of all kinds of *dharmas*, the *jnani* alone is the one who has observed all *dharmas*.[30]

49 *Japa*

B12 For those who cannot through the path of knowledge reach the place where 'I' exists, it is better to know during *japa* the place where the Supreme Word ['I-I'] shines.

706 Seeking 'What is the source from which the "I" rises?' is the most direct route to knowledge. It will be better for those who cannot dive deeply within in silence to study carefully, while mentally doing *japa*, where the Supreme Word arises.

707 Since you yourself are the form of *japa*, if you enquire 'Who am I?' and know your real nature, you will find that the *japa* you were previously doing with effort will always be going on effortlessly and untiringly in the Heart.

708 Until the external objects that one knows merge completely in the subject who knows them, and until one firmly knows what the nature of the true Self is, what use is it to say vainly with your mouth 'I am God, I am God'?

709 Instead of wandering about repeating 'I am the Supreme,' quietly abide as the Supreme. Miseries will not go away merely

[30] The implication of these verses is that correct behaviour does not result in Self-realisation. Rather, it is a consequence of it.

by loudly shouting 'I am That' but only by abiding as 'I am That'.

710 Diseases will not be cured merely by repeating the name of the medicine but only by drinking the medicine. Likewise, the bonds of birth will not leave us merely by doing *japa* of many great sayings such as 'I am Siva'.

51 The Holy Name

712 Upon investigation it is discovered that when the reality, the Heart, seemingly spreads out in the form of consciousness to assume many thousands of names, the very first of these is 'I'. This you should know.

713 Since along with 'I', the previously mentioned first name, 'am' always shines as the light of reality, 'I am' is also the name.[31]

714 Among the many thousands of names of God, no name suits God, who abides in the Heart, devoid of thought, so aptly as 'I' or 'I am'.

715 Of all the known names of God, 'I-I' alone will resound triumphantly when the ego is destroyed, rising as the silent Supreme Word in the Heart-space of those whose attention is Selfward-facing.

716 Even if one unceasingly remembers that divine name 'I-I', it will safely lead one to the source from which thoughts arise, thereby destroying the body-based ego.

717 The individual soul that occupies the body appears and disappears. Investigation reveals that only the Self, the substratum of the body-bound soul, is the true import of the word 'I'.

[31] The Tamil word *ullam* means both 'Heart' and 'am', so the identity between 'I am' and 'Heart' is very clear in the original verses. This dual meaning is also mentioned by Bhagavan in *Arunachala Pancharatnam*, verse two, which states: 'Since you shine as "I" in the Heart, your name itself is Heart.'

53 *Bhakti* and *Vichara*

724 The attainment of realisation that results at the end of the practice of enquiry into the beloved true knowledge is solely due to the grace of God, who shines as the Self, one's own reality, the soul of the soul.

725 Unless the Lord who resides within, by the power of his grace, pulls the mind within, who can, merely through the power of the stealthy and mischievous mind, prevent its outgoing nature, reach the Heart and rest in peace?

726 The grace of God, whose form is eightfold,[32] cannot be obtained without the grace of the Guru. Neither by arts and learning nor by any other means will grace be obtained, but only by [Guru] *bhakti.*

727 Let one not doubt whether God's grace, the great support, has been bestowed on one or not, for the fact that one's mind is very interested in enquiry, having a great liking for release from bondage, is itself proof.

728 The enquiry 'Who am I?', which is the means for abiding within, and the grace of God are each a great help to the other. Together they lead to the state of oneness with the Supreme Self. This is the truth.

729 Unless the Supreme Reality reveals itself in the Heart, the delusion of this world dream will not end. The enquiry 'Who am I who sees this dream?' is the worship that brings forth this revelation.

730 Being aware of one's own Self is said to be the supreme devotion to God, who is unattainable by the mind and its faculties. These two [the Self and God] are by nature one and the same.

731 Know that the path of *jnana* and the path of *bhakti* are

[32] The eight forms are earth, water, fire, air, space, the sun, the moon, and all individual beings.

inter-related. Follow these inseparable two paths without dividing one from the other.

B13 Attending to the Self is devotion to the Supreme Lord because the Lord exists as the Self.

732 If one sees 'Who am I who longs to gain the grace of the Lord?' the ego will be destroyed, and as a consequence the grace of the Lord will reveal itself. After the ego has been destroyed in this way, in the space of grace, which is itself the Lord, no other impurity will exist.

733 Since the other two impurities [karma and *maya*] grow only by depending on the ego [*anava*],[33] the [fundamental] attachment, when the ego is destroyed, the other two cannot possibly survive.

55 One-pointed Devotion

734 Those who have one-pointed devotion towards God are like the magnetic needle that always stands facing the north. They will never be perplexed or go astray in the ocean of attachments to this world.

735 Those who live in the world clinging whole-heartedly to God are like children who whirl round and round a pillar, holding it firmly. Since they have a strong and unshakeable hold on God, they are devoid of ego and therefore will never fall a prey to the delusion of the world.

736 If one fixes one's mind firmly on that pure Supreme Reality that pervades all activities, one will not be affected by any number of activities that are performed.

737 Among all the rice grains, only those that move here and there will be crushed by the hand mill. Those [grains] that do

[33] According to Saiva Siddhanta, the three impurities [*malas*] are *anava*, karma and *maya*.

not move away from the centre will not be crushed.[34]

56 Meditation and Enquiry

738 Mentally imagining oneself to be the Supreme Reality that shines as existence-consciousness-bliss is meditation. Fixing the mind in the Self so that the seed of false delusion is destroyed, is enquiry.[35]

739 Whoever meditates upon the Self in whatever imaginary form attains it only in that form. Those peaceful ones who remain quiet, without any such imagination, attain the noble and unqualified state of oneness.[36]

740 The source can be reached only when the ego has been completely annihilated. How can the ego meditate 'I am That'? To remain silently in the Self, having destroyed the ego, is the proper way.

741 The truth is, Siva shines as the formless consciousness. If one meditates on him and then sees him as one of the objects that the senses perceive, this is a result of the folly of not knowing oneself by enquiring 'Who am I?'

[34] A hand mill consists of two stone wheels, one on top of the other, held together by a central axle. Grains are poured between the stones via a hole in the centre of the upper stone. During grinding, the top stone is rotated by means of a handle that is attached near the circumference. When the grinding is over, there are usually grains near the central axle that have not been powdered because the forces exerted there were insufficient to break them down.

[35] Bhagavan always maintained that meditation (*dhyana*) was a mental activity whereas *vichara* (enquiry) is thought-free abidance in the Self. The same idea is expressed in *Who Am I?*: 'Always keeping the mind fixed in the Self is called self-enquiry, whereas meditation is thinking oneself to be *Brahman.*'

[36] By focussing on a mental image of God, one can, by the power of concentration, have a vision of a deity in that form, but all this is imagination only. The true Self can only be experienced when all such imagination is absent.

60 *Nididhyasana*[37]

749 The outside universe, comprising the earth and everything else, only exists as long as one does not enquire. It becomes non-existent when one does enquire. If, instead of focussing on the outer universe, one pays attention to and knows that which exists in the Heart, there will be no necessity even to have the thought of rebirth.

750 Whatever one thinks of unceasingly, by the power of such thinking one becomes that. So, if one can, with great love, realise the Self, the substratum of everything, and if one can abide [as the Self] in such a way that the twin attachments of I and mine are destroyed, then unhappiness will not approach.

751 Perfect and peaceful clarity is what the *Vedas* declare to be the ultimate goal of *tapas*. However, even if the fruit of *tapas* is abundant and immeasurable benefits, if there still remains a trace of mental agitation, then renounce them.

752 As long as a thought arises that something is indispensable, let one have it and enjoy it. But when, through some bitter experiences, a thought rises that one should be rid of it, it should be given up at once.

753 Do not determine God's grace merely by the achievement of various kinds of prosperity that come as a result of meritorious deeds, but only by the peaceful clarity of consciousness, a clarity that is devoid of all the mental activities that are caused by forgetting [the Self].

754 Rather than achieving the powerful *sankalpa siddhi* that enables one to attain anything that one thinks of, one should attain inner peace, where not even a single thought arises, by abiding in true consciousness. This is the most powerful state.

[37] *Nididhyasana* means experiencing the truth. More generally it means spiritual practice that leads to an experience of the truth.

62 Aids to Enquiry

758 The mind externalises itself as the seer, the act of seeing and the object seen. To make the activities of the mind subside, the best path is to train the mind to see its own nature.

759 Since one's own reality shines in itself as 'I am', it can be aware of itself. This unrejectable, real light of the Self is the best aid through which one can enquire into the nature of the Self as it is in the Heart.

760 Having known through enquiry that the state of mind between two thoughts is the Supreme Self, abiding in the Heart is the [supreme] state.

761 By continuously doing *japa* many times, by meditating with love upon a form of God, and by observing diet restrictions, the mind will become one-pointed. It will gain strength because its past tendencies have been weakened.

762 Just as the wandering nature of an elephant's trunk is easily restrained by the iron chain that it holds, in the same way the stealthy, wandering nature of the ignoble and weak mind will be restrained by [meditation on] name and form.[38]

763 Self-enquiry will only be successful if the mind has gained the inner strength of a single-minded focus. A weak mind will be like wet wood put into the fire of *jnana vichara*.

764 Those advanced souls who have given up all desires, who know that increasing misery alone is the fruit of desires, they will attain the eternal bliss of the Self by taking to the direct path of self-enquiry.

64 Self-abidance and Discrimination

769 Only Self-abidance, shining without a flaw, will destroy all the bondage that is not the Self. The mental discrimination

[38] That is, by mentally holding on to the name or form of a particular God or Guru.

that distinguishes reality, one's own nature, from the unreal, is only an aid to pure desirelessness.

770 If you enquire, you are not that which you take yourself to be. So, enquire what you are, drown in the Heart and be directly established as 'You are That'.

771 Knowing well that there is no permanent foothold anywhere for the soul except in remaining as the one reality, destroy, without aversion, desires towards everything, and then abide in the Heart, one with supreme existence-consciousness.

772 Those who have destroyed ignorance by the clarity of knowledge and who are established firmly in Self-abidance have minds that are completely dead. They will survive as eternally liberated, having been given *jiva samadhi* at the feet of Siva.[39]

65 Being Still

773 What our Lord [Ramana] firmly teaches us to take as the greatest and most powerful *tapas*, is only this much: '*Summa iru*.' There is no other duty for the mind and its thoughts.[40]

774 The lazy state of just being and shining is the state of Self, and that is the highest state that one can become. Revere as the most virtuous those who have attained that lazy state which cannot be attained except by very great and rare *tapas*.[41]

[39] Some Hindu saints are buried alive and are supposed to exist indefinitely in a state of suspended animation in their *samadhis*. This is known as taking *jiva samadhi*. In this state the body appears to be dead, but the *jiva* is still alive inside it. Bhagavan uses the term *jiva samadhi* in this verse to denote the exact opposite: someone who is physically still alive, but whose mind is dead.

[40] Since *iru* is the imperative of both the verb 'to be' and the verb 'to stay', *summa iru* can be translated by a wide variety of expressions: 'just be', 'be still', 'stay quiet' 'be as you are' 'stay as you are' and so on. This verse appears to be a comment by Muruganar, rather than a statement by Bhagavan.

[41] Bhagavan appears to be making fun here of those people who said that a *sadhana* of being still was an incitement to laziness.

66 The Individual I

775 He who does not have the knowledge 'I am, I am', and who behaves as if he is a fleśhy body, 'I am so and so', will vainly suffer when the body dies because he will be caught in the net of the dream-like delusion that he too is dying.

776 The flawless Supreme Reality, true knowledge, shines as the primal one and perfect whole. To rise as an individual separate from the Lord, who cannot be defined as 'He is this', even in order to worship him, is wrong.

777 Reality is the unbroken space of *jnana*. To rise forcibly as a jumping and suffering false 'I', different from that reality, is to commit the sin of slaying the highest *dharma* and cutting it into two pieces.

778 In the reality that shines as one, devoid of knowledge and movement, how is it possible for foreign rule to arise except by making an empty imagination of a mental world that is different from God?

779 The nature of bondage is merely the rising, ruinous thought 'I am different from the reality'. Since one surely cannot remain separate from the reality, reject that thought whenever it rises.

780 'Do nothing for which you will repent. If you do it is better not to do such a thing again.' If you leave the state of being in the Self, do not think any thought. If you do it is better not to do such a thing again.[42]

781 Don't become disheartened by thinking, 'When shall I obtain the bliss of yoga, the state of Self?' because the true state of Self-knowledge is always the same, shining timelessly without spatial coordinates such as near and far.

[42] The quote is verse 655 of the *Tirukkural* by Tiruvalluvar, an ancient Tamil collection of spiritual and moral maxims.

67 Retreating to the Source

782 Reaching and knowing the birth-place by enquiring 'What is our birth-place?' is the best of all paths to root out miseries that can only exist in the place you have entered.[43]

783 Mind, you who wander searching, not knowing that the state of liberation is your own right: if you go back the way you came, you will regain the state of liberation, the unending perfect happiness.

784 Until one's own subsidence in the Heart, the centre, is experienced, the knowledge derived from the five senses will not subside even a little, and until this delusive knowledge is completely extinguished, knowledge of reality will not be attained.

785 Mind, instead of looking at and worrying about imaginary things, turn towards your source and enter the Heart. In that supreme state of consciousness all will become the one non-dual Self, your real nature.

68 The Conduct of a *Sadhaka*

786 When it is said that even the mere slipping down from the state of the pure non-dual Self is a crime for those who have started to do their duty, will it, on consideration, be proper for them to interfere in the affairs of others?[44]

787 If one always sees only the good qualities in others instead of seeing any bad, one's life will be very pleasant, leaving no room for any disgust.

788 Unless one follows the principle, 'That which is essential to be reformed is only my own mind', one's mind will become

[43] The 'place you have entered' denotes the states that the rising mind has entered, whereas the 'birth-place' is the source from which the mind arises.

[44] The duty in this case would seem to be the practice of Self-abidance.

more and more impure by seeing the defects of others.

789 Mind, it is not because you have attained egoless, sweet qualities that great ones are kind towards you. It is only because, in their greatness, they forgive all your accumulated defects, without being bothered by them. This you should know.

790 To err is human nature. Yet if those who have strongly practised virtuous behaviour make mistakes, it is good for them to admit their errors and to reform themselves instead of hiding their mistakes in order to maintain their prestige.

791 Since the prescribed moral and social observances help one for a long time, they are fit to be accepted and observed. But when they obstruct the highest practice, the enquiry for true knowledge, give them up as useless.

792 When whatever you desire is obtained, just as you desire it, do not think it is due to the power of your *tapas*. Knowing that it is because of God's grace, love his feet more and more.

793 Let that which happens happen as it is destined to happen. Do not think to go against it even in the least. Without starting anything new, abide as one with the divine witness who peacefully shines in the Heart.

794 The fruit of making a failure of one's efforts is to prepare one to seek the Guru's grace. It is to make one understand that only by the Guru's grace, and not merely by one's own effort, can spiritual accomplishment be obtained.

795 Dattatreya, the son of Atri Maharshi, learned lessons from everything. For those like him, whose minds are not crooked and perverted, all the life in the world will be a spiritual school.[45]

[45] In *Srimad Bhagavatam* it is said that the sage Dattatreya learned twenty-four good principles from twenty-four things and people he encountered in his everyday life.

69 Quietude

796 Higher than quietude there is no achievement; higher than quietude there is no effort; higher than quietude there is no *tapas*; higher than quietude there is no deathless life.

797 Agitation is the trouble-giving enemy; agitation drives one to do heinous sins; agitation is drunkenness; agitation of mind is the deep dark pit.[46]

70 The Conduct of a Disciple

798 The Guru shines with the highest divine quality, that of uncaused grace. The duty of a disciple is, even in dream, is to follow steadfastly his worthy teachings, and to abide by them.

799 Though those who steadfastly follow the path to salvation may sometimes have to swerve from the vedic codes, either due to forgetfulness or due to any other reason, they should never go against the words of the Guru.

800 The words of sages say that if one does a wrong to God, it can be rectified by the Guru, but a wrong done to the Guru cannot be rectified even by God.

B14 O Son, always have non-duality in the Heart, but never express non-duality in action. Non-duality may be applied

[46] These are Muruganar's comments on these two verses:

'What is here called quietude is the state of stillness of mind. This can be achieved only by unceasing enquiry. When the mind knows that in truth there is nothing to reject or to accept, it will lose its movements and will abide in supreme peace. Since such peace is the seed of the natural state, it is said here to be the deathless life.

'Since the rapid movement of very subtle thoughts is itself misery, that agitation is described here as drunkenness and as a heinous enemy. Since all the inner enemies such as desire, anger and pride are nothing but the subtle movements of thoughts, he who has destroyed that movement will from that time be devoid of all kinds of enemies, heinous sins, miseries and the pit of ignorance.'

towards the three worlds, but know that non-duality should never be applied towards the Guru.[47]

78 Non-attachment

822 A boat may remain in water, but if water enters the boat, it will bring great catastrophe. Likewise, a man may live in the world, but if the world enters the man, his whole life will be miserable.[48]

823 Only the pot that takes in water will drown in it, A log, which does not absorb water, will not. Similarly, only those who inwardly attach themselves to the world will be deluded while those who do not attach themselves to the world will not be deluded, even though they are engaged in worldly activities.

825 Instead of clinging to this wonderful but utterly false world for refuge and thereby drowning in it, it is wise to renounce it inwardly, like a shell of a tamarind fruit, and forget it totally.[49]

826 A heavy building raised on foundations that are not strongly built will collapse in devastation and disgrace. Therefore it is essential from the very outset for aspirants who work hard to adhere strictly and at any cost to the preliminary observances.[50]

[47] This is a translation of a verse from Sankara's *Tattvopadesa*. Bhagavan composed it after reading verse 800. The same translation appears as verse 39 of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*. The three worlds are the realms of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

[48] This is Muruganar's comment on this verse:

'It is not the world itself but only the attachment towards the world that constitutes the bondage of mundane existence. Attachment is caused by the mind, and not by what is outside. No harm will befall one by merely living in the world. All miseries come into existence only because of one's desire to enjoy the world.'

[49] As a tamarind fruit ripens, a space develops between the inner pulp and the outer pod.

[50] A note in the Tamil text indicates that the preliminary observances are devotion and non-attachment.

827 If one unceasingly and firmly clings to the true being and in this way achieves clarity, the attachments, which are superimposed appearances like the blueness of the sky, will of their own accord go away, leaving one pure.

Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai

I will conclude this section on Muruganar with a brief selection of his verses from Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai *that give further details of his early life, the circumstances that brought him to Bhagavan, and the events that occurred once he arrived.*

Over many *yugas* I went repeatedly through the eighty-four lakh forms of life[51] in which, with the indescribable, intense suffering of embodied existence, I longed for the multifarious miseries that itch and eat one away. Moving up the many steps [of animate life forms] in the ordained manner, I came to a human birth, a birth fit for attaining the clarity of *jnana*. Though I had such a birth, and though my mind had love towards the Supreme, the nature of the Supreme was not realised. I came to the conclusion that, since the entity known as God might be either real or an unreal imagination, what really conferred benefit on my soul was good conduct and character. Convinced of this, I practised [righteous] behaviour, but though I tried, I frequently failed.

The Supreme Being Siva, having no body-delusion, abides as the real nature of one's own Self. Shining within the intellect, illuminating it, it cannot be reached by those indulging in fallacious arguments. Tolerating my immature conduct and treating me as if I had attained freedom from impurities, [Siva] considered admitting me to the group of his companions.[52]

In the same way that a hunter catches a wild deer by showing a tame one [as a decoy], He [Siva] displays a body to catch [embodied] souls. Since I regarded myself as a form, in order not

[51] There is a Hindu tradition that souls have to pass through 8.4 million births, each in a different species, before they can attain a human birth. A *yuga* is a period of millions of years.

[52] In Saivism this is a descriptive way of saying 'giving liberation'.

to frighten me *[Sadasiva]* manifested within the unconditioned reality through the power of very pure *maya*...[53]

He became the incomparable sage at Arunachala, which is praised even by the gods. Like the worm that becomes a wasp on being stung by a wasp, through his mere presence and glance my 'I' and 'mine' were destroyed. Seeing me as his own Self, he enabled me to experience myself as enduring, pure being-consciousness. With my body and mind absent, I became full of Self. This is how he bestowed his grace on this pitiable one.

Without belittling this by thinking that this rare gesture was an ordinary one, I took his feet as my sole aim, becoming their inseparable shadow. Thinking of his grace, the mind softened and melted. I became like a madman. Tears were flowing, the body was trembling, thought and speech were obstructed. Love surged and destroyed the ego. Sweat was trickling, and there was horripilation. The mind and senses became one and totally surrendered. With all my actions gone, all activities are now Siva's. He established me in this state of service to the Lord.

Obeisance to my Lord who wears the crescent moon on his head and who redeemed me in this way... You did not reject me, saying that I was a vile, unworthy person who has fallen from his state, like hair that has fallen from the head. Instead, you came of your own accord, casting the net of your lotus eyes. In the sight of many scholars who were well versed in the *Vedas*,[54] which are the impeccable and indestructible truth, you bestowed your benign glance and established me in the unmoving state.

You are the unmoving one; you are the compassionate one; you are the skilful Lord of true knowledge; you are the medicine for the disease of birth that causes great misery. To poor me, who was totally lost by not seeking consciousness, you are like

[53] Bhagavan sometimes said that the form of the Guru is illusory. He compared it to a lion that appears in an elephant's dream. The shock of the appearance wakes the elephant up, at which point it realises that the form of the lion was merely a mental projection.

[54] This probably refers to Ganapati Muni and his disciples since members of this group were regular visitors to Bhagavan during this period.

the store laid down to be used in times of adversity. You are the God who saved me from the mouth of the crocodile, my past karma.[55]

* * *

Human beings wallow in *samsara*, regarding themselves as forms, without realising the rarity of the grace-embodied form of the *Sadguru*. Though this form has manifested to destroy the mass of their dark *vasanas*, [those] who are under the spell of the 'I am the body' delusion, through their simple-minded view, which is prompted by ignorance, extend the same notion ['he is a body'] to the *Sadguru*.

If, through their immaturity, they behave in this way, then, like those who do not get their winnowing completed when the wind is blowing, they will, in the end, regret and lament over their folly. In order that they redeem themselves by knowing the *Sadguru's* real nature, and prompted by my friendship towards them, I will sing of the real nature of Ramana, which was revealed to me through his cool compassion:

The Lord of Arunachala, which is solidified consciousness, is Ramana, a delight to my mind. In him innumerable special attributes appear together, but since he does not identify with any of them, he is therefore declared to be the primal, unmanifest reality.

He is more minute than an atom, but he will not bow in reverence or extol delightfully anything as separate from him. In his godliness he is greater than a mountain. Even so, to those who accept this view and bow to him, he will not utter words of blessings. Accordingly, he who has the wealth that is not associated with form and attribute can neither be called great nor small.

In addition, he shines within all beings as consciousness, but however much and however hard one may exert one's thoughts, he can never be experienced in the mind. What a wonder! He who is the embodiment of *tapas* will shine of his own accord if one becomes calm and still. Consequently, he whose nature is wonderful and whose form is the space of consciousness is neither difficult nor easy to know.

[55] Selected extracts from *'Potri Tiruvahaval'*, lines 1–110.

Similarly, it is difficult to say whether or not he has *prarabdha,* whether he has form or is formless, whether he is masculine, feminine or neuter, knowledge or ignorance, one or many, atomic or cosmic, Self or non-Self, joy or misery. So, it is extremely difficult to define his nature, his actions, his ways and their propriety.

In essence, Ramana's real nature defies definition.[56]

[56] *Swarupa Tiruvahaval.* In the first edition of *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai* (1933) this was the opening poem. In later editions the first poem was *Ramana Puranam,* a work that Bhagavan himself helped Muruganar to write. In all the later editions *Swarupa Tiruvahaval* is the second poem.

T. P. Ramachandra Iyer

T. P. Ramachandra Iyer, called 'T. P .R.' by all Bhagavan's devotees, was a native of Tiruvannamalai. He saw Bhagavan a few times in his childhood, but at that time he was more attracted by the sweets that were given out as prasad *than by Bhagavan's presence or teachings. In the 1920s his interest in religion and philosophy led him finally to Bhagavan. He had asked one of his relatives whether Bhagavan could read his mind and tell him his past and future. The relative responded by telling him to go and see for himself. T. P. R. has described what happened next:*

'I entered Sri Bhagavan's hall and looked at him. That is all. Sri Bhagavan very graciously and expectantly looked at me. Full of benign compassion, he looked into the very core of my being. I could feel that he was sensing my entire being. I fell flat on my face in prostration to him with an experience as totally consuming as it was convincing. A discovery that "He" whom I was hankering for all these years, who could sway my entire being and guide my energies, was here. So great yet so simple was this. I rose up. Bhagavan smiled again and bade me be seated. All the emotions, thoughts and surging doubts were nowhere! I felt I had found my refuge, which was the greatest fortune of my life. It was a great conviction born of instant experience through his grace.'

In later life T. P. R. worked as a lawyer in Madras, where he handled much of the ashram's legal business in the 1930s and 40s. He also served both as an interpreter and an attendant in Bhagavan's hall.

When he was once asked to explain what impact Bhagavan had had on his life, he replied, 'I am not left with any sense of want or void in internal strength. This is the direct result of a conviction instilled by experiencing the grace of Sri Bhagavan. It should be so with everyone who has sought his grace.'

On an auspicious day in the early thirties a visitor arranged for *bhiksha* to be given to Sri Bhagavan and all those present at the ashram. While we were talking about the forthcoming meal in the hall, Bhagavan suddenly recalled two early occasions when he was offered a *bhiksha.*

'After leaving Madurai for good [in 1896] I only ate food in private houses on two occasions. One of them was when I ate at the home of Muthukrishna Bhagavathar of Tirukoilur while I was still travelling to Tiruvannamalai.'

Then, turning to me, he observed, 'The other occasion was at your grandfather's. That was the only house I ever ate in after coming to Tiruvannamalai.'

I was delighted to hear of the good fortune my grandfather had had in serving Sri Bhagavan in this way. I asked Bhagavan how this came about and he graciously described the event, vividly recapturing the occasion for me.

'After I came to this town, I had *bhiksha* in your house, eating from a leaf plate. Your grandfather, a devotee of Siva, was there. He was tall, had a stout frame, and was adorned impressively with a garland of *rudraksha* and other beads. Every day he would unfailingly visit the temple of Arunachaleswara and return only after having *darshan.* In those days [1896] I used to live near the Gopura Subramania Temple. Every day your grandfather would sit before me for a while without saying anything. Then he would rise and go away. I was a young boy keeping silence. He was an elderly person who also kept silent while he was with me, though he used to watch me all the time. He was well known in the town, and people of consequence used to be his guests. Do you know what happened? One day, some official arrived at his house and arrangements were made for a feast. That day also, as usual, after going into the temple and having *darshan,* he came to me and sat down. The thought came to him that he should take me that day to his house and give me *bhiksha.*

'As soon as he rose to return home, he abandoned his customary silence and said to me, "Hum, hum, get up! Get up! We will go to my home, have *bhiksha* and come back."

'What to do? I was not used to speaking, so I made negative signs, shaking my head and hands, signifying that it was not necessary. He did not listen to me or heed me. He was determined to take me that day and offer *bhiksha.* What could I do? He was big and strong whereas I was small and slight in comparison.

'He repeated his demand: "Hum, hum, get up! Get up! You are just a youth. Leave yoga and *tapas* for a while. We shall go to my home, eat *bhiksha* and return."

'So saying, he took my arm, linked it into his, and made me

get up and follow him. I was led to his house, which was near the temple chariot. It was a very spacious house with verandas on both sides. In between there was a big open courtyard with an edifice to goddess Tulasi in the centre. He made me take the most important place on the northern veranda. Then he spread a leaf larger than all the others and served me himself. It was only after I had finished eating that he ate his own meal. That was the only occasion I entered a house in this town. In those days, because I never had a bath, the body would be smelling. No one would come close to me. In spite of all that, your grandfather used to come unfailingly and sit with me. In this town, so many people would come, see me and go. But he alone realised that though I was a young boy, what was in this [body] was a Fullness.'

In his youth, Bhagavan's body was remarkably resilient, but as the years went by he began to be afflicted by several ailments. In the last ten years of his life he was rarely in good health. His poor state of health was often exacerbated by his habit of refusing medicine or medical advice. In the early 1940s, for example, Sri Bhagavan showed symptoms of slight jaundice. He avoided medication and grew weaker and weaker every day. Devotees implored him to take some treatment, but without success. Some of us prayed while a few others did silent *pradakshinas* of the hall in which Sri Bhagavan was seated. Major Chadwick was prominent among those who were beseeching Sri Bhagavan to take some medicine.

One day, just as I was starting from home to go to my office in Madras, the postman handed me a letter. It was from Major Chadwick. The letter, I recollect, read like this:

'Dear T. P. R., I am sorry to tell you of the declining health of Sri Bhagavan. He is growing weaker every day and is doing nothing to alleviate it. He will not take any medicines or heed our requests and persuasions. Seeing all this makes us very miserable. Today a thought came to me. You know that Sri Bhagavan always avoids medicines, but he does not reject ayurvedic preparations such as 'black halwa' (*lehiyam*). If he is offered some, he may accept it. So why don't you go to some ayurvedic expert or pharmacy and ask for some medicine for Sri Bhagavan's symptoms and condition? You can then make it up in the form of a *lehiyam* and send it to him at the ashram. If it is your good karma he may be pleased to take it. But don't say

I wrote to you or expressed concern. You can say that by chance you found a well-prepared *lehiyam* that is good for many things, and that it is only a tonic and not a medicine. I shall expect your immediate response.'

After reading this letter I went straight to the Venkataramana Dispensary in Mylapore. I met the senior physician in charge there and narrated the symptoms, without disclosing the identity of the person who had them. I requested him to prescribe and give something helpful. The doctor, of course, asked me why I could not bring the patient for a personal examination. I gave Bhagavan's age and a few other details and somehow convinced the doctor that the patient was unable to come in person. The doctor listened to my story, prescribed two items, an oil and a *lehiyam* called *jiragavilvadi lehiyam,* and advised me how to use them. I knew Sri Bhagavan was not in the habit of consuming any oils internally, so I merely purchased one pound of *lehiyam* and went to my office. I kept a small portion for myself, since I knew that Sri Bhagavan would reject it if he felt that I had bought the medicine specially for him.

I packed the rest and sent it to Sri Niranjanananda Swami, the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram, with a letter saying:

'Dear Sri Chinnaswami, today as I was passing through Mylapore I peeped into Venkataramana Dispensary where a fresh *lehiyam* was being prepared. It was called *jiragavilvadi lehiyam* and it was ready for sale. I felt impelled to buy some and did so. It is so sweet and good that I am sending it on to you. I have kept a small portion for myself. You may place the remainder before Sri Bhagavan as an offering. This is not a medicine. It belongs to the class of tonics that are generally taken by everyone.'

I was told later that Sri Chinnaswami placed both the parcel and the letter before Sri Bhagavan.

That weekend, as was usual then with me, I left for Tiruvannamalai. After I had prostrated to Sri Bhagavan in the hall he turned to me and showed me a small container.

'See!' he said, 'This is the *lehiyam* you have sent. I am using it regularly four times a day. *Jiraga* and *vilva* are very good for biliousness.'

I felt elated and happy at the success of Mr Chadwick's scheme and sat down before Sri Bhagavan.

However, after about half a minute Sri Bhagavan asked me,

'Did anyone write to you to send this?'

I immediately admitted it and replied, 'Yes, Bhagavan, Chadwick wrote to me and suggested that I do what I did. Since I also wanted Sri Bhagavan to regain his health, I did what he asked me to do, pretending that I was doing it on my own initiative.'

Sri Bhagavan laughed graciously and remarked: 'See that! See that!'

That evening Chadwick entered the hall at 4 p.m. looking elated and happy, but he had hardly risen from his obeisance when Sri Bhagavan asked, 'Chadwick! Did you write anything?'

For a moment Chadwick looked shocked and surprised, but then, as he had initiated his action because of his extreme love and devotion to Sri Bhagavan, he happily owned up.

'Yes, Bhagavan, I wrote all that to T. P. R. What can we do? Sri Bhagavan will never take any medicine. We devotees were miserable because we had to witness Sri Bhagavan growing weaker day by day. So I wrote for the medicine and now I am happy.'[1]

Bhagavan was unable to criticise his secret activity because it had been motivated by such love and devotion.

Bhagavan liked simple remedies, preferably those made from ingredients that could be found locally. He knew the medicinal properties of many of the plants that were growing wild on

[1] Though Bhagavan generally refused to take medicines that were sent to him, there was one occasion when he alarmed everyone by volunteering to eat them all simultaneously. The following account comes from *Bhagavan Smritulu*, and is narrated by Roda McIver:

'Many devotees used to bring or send medicines for Bhagavan. Some were for external application to his rheumatic joints while others were supposed to be ingested for strength. Since Bhagavan rarely touched such donations, bottles from many different medical systems accumulated. One day Bhagavan asked for a big empty bottle to be brought and then asked for all the medicines that had accumulated to be poured into it. When this task had been accomplished, he asked his attendant to give him one spoonful of the mixture every day. Some of the medicines were poisonous and were only meant to be applied externally.

'"How can you make such a request?" someone asked in amazement.

'Bhagavan answered, "People send these medicines because of the love they feel towards me. How can I apply or drink all of them? If I

Arunachala and occasionally recommended them to devotees. He even composed a few Tamil verses that contained recipes for various ayurvedic preparations.[2] He was a strong advocate of a simple, nutritious diet for both the prevention and the cure of common ailments.

On one occasion I informed Sri Bhagavan that I had only eaten *kanji*[3] for lunch since I had dysentery and didn't want to provoke my stomach too much. Sri Bhagavan showed his

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mix them all together and eat a portion every day, everyone can be satisfied that I am taking a little of his medicine. This is the best way to dispose of all these things."

'The ashram doctor was sent for and when he heard what Bhagavan was proposing to do, he came running to the hall. He was shocked when he saw what was in the bottle. There were ayurvedic, allopathic and homeopathic medicines and various poisonous oils that were not meant to be drunk at all. Everyone, including the doctor, begged Bhagavan not to take any of the mixture. Someone nearby even attempted to hide the bottle so that Bhagavan would not have access to it.'

The matter was eventually resolved when one of the devotees had the bright idea of invoking Bhagavan's legendary sense of equality.

'You always share everything with the devotees in the hall,' he said. 'How can you eat all this by yourself and not give any to the people around you?'

Bhagavan accepted this point, but since he knew that the mixture might make everyone present ill, he agreed that his attendant could dispose of the whole bottle, without anyone having to sample it.

[2] Some of these verses were included in a Tamil booklet entitled *Precious Words And Stray Verses Of The Maharshi* that was brought out to commemorate Bhagavan's birth centenary in 1980. So far as I am aware, none of these verses has ever been translated. S. S. Cohen (*Guru Ramana*, diary, 29th August, 1949) narrates an amusing incident surrounding the composition of one of these verses:

'Sri Maharshi composed a verse in Tamil over which an English lady-devotee grew very jubilant and looked forward to reading it in English translation, taking it to be a hymn in praise of the Lord of Creation. It turned out to be a laxative recipe, which Maharshi had written with his own hand in ten long lines. Bhagavan is bubbling with joy over it and is showing it to everybody like a schoolboy who has written his first poem.'

[3] *Kanji* is a gruel or porridge that is made by boiling rice until the separate grains disintegrate and coalesce.

approval of my choice of remedy and then spoke highly of the efficacy of a *kanji* that was made from rice water, dried ginger, coriander and rock salt. Given my condition, I was pleasantly surprised when Sri Bhagavan told me that *kanji* was about to appear on the ashram menu. Sri Bhagavan rarely indicated his preferences when food was about to be served to him, but he had been heard to extol the virtues of *kanji* so highly, the cooks had decided to prepare some. Sri Bhagavan liked a simple diet himself, but the cooks and the devotees who supplied him with food generally insisted on giving him more elaborate dishes since they felt that serving very simple dishes showed a lack of devotion.

After telling me about this recipe for *kanji*, Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'People do not realise how wholesome *kanji* is, and how tasty. The simple dishes are the best. When I lived on the hill, Keeraipatti used to collect leaves from the hill and prepare whole meals out of them. Even though she was half blind, she would locate them on the hill and make delicious dishes out of them. In those days we would make *kanji* plus one vegetable dish from everything that was available. None of the fine dishes they make here now can equal the simple fare we enjoyed then. People here do not realise how much enjoyment there is in such a meal.

'People who eat rich dishes all the time have no appreciation of how a poor man loves and enjoys his simple food. He comes home hungry after a hard day's work in the fields, and when he sits down for his meal, down goes one huge fistful after another until it looks as though he might swallow the plate as well. On the other hand, a rich man sits down to a meal with all sorts of delicacies served on expensive plates and then nibbles and sips, without relishing anything. Mostly, he derives no satisfaction from the rich fare that is spread in front of him.

'Even after we came down here, after leaving Skandashram, we still used to make *kanji*, often for the workers who were helping us. In the beginning of our stay here we employed many men to clear the cacti and level the land. We used to prepare a midday meal for them in addition to giving them daily wages. For all of us we only used to prepare two dishes: a huge pot of *kanji* and another of all the vegetables we happened to have on hand. You can imagine the quantity when I tell you that the ladle we stirred it with was the branch of a tree. In those days I

used to do all the grinding for the cooking. Once I made a kind of *uppuma* out of leaves and *ravai* [pulverised wheat grains]. It was seven parts leaves and one part *ravai*.[4] Everyone enjoyed it, but when I told them what it was and how it was made, they were not so happy. People like to think that they are eating something elaborate and expensive.'

We all worried about Sri Bhagavan's health, particularly in the last few years of his life when it was clear to everyone that he was getting increasingly feeble and debilitated, but Bhagavan himself was mostly indifferent to the various pains and problems that his body attracted. If he had any concern at all, it was that his assorted body problems might be an inconvenience to the devotees who had come to see him. Even then, he was most unwilling to take any treatment. One day, for example, Bhagavan vomited in his leaf plate in the dining room. He got up immediately and went out. Just at that moment I entered the hall, having come straight from the railway station.

On seeing me Bhagavan said without any preliminaries, 'See what has happened! I vomited in my plate in the dining room. I could not control myself. How obnoxious! I don't know how much inconvenience I must have caused to everyone there.' There was a clear note of sadness in his voice.

'At such times it is good to drink lemon juice or orange juice,' I suggested.

'Who will bring me such things?' asked Bhagavan helplessly. 'Who will bring a lemon or an orange now?'

'Why, don't you have any?' I asked Krishnaswami, his attendant, who was standing next to him.

Krishnaswami remembered that someone had brought a dozen oranges that day.

'They are kept in the storeroom,' he said. 'I will bring them.'

Even though Bhagavan was physically distressed, he still displayed his usual frugality and his sense of equality.

'Bring only one orange,' he said. 'Give half of that to Bhagavan, a quarter to Krishnaswami and the other quarter to Ramachandra Iyer.'

Krishnaswami ignored the instruction and brought three oranges, but Bhagavan did not notice. One was cut and I was given a third of it.

[4] A conventional *uppuma* would be predominantly *ravai* with a few fried vegetables and spices mixed in.

After receiving my share I said, 'Bhagavan, I should get three-quarters of an orange, but I have only been given a third.'

I thought this was the best way of telling Bhagavan that there were three oranges and that we expected him to eat 1½ himself.

'What!' he exclaimed.

'Krishnaswami has brought three oranges,' I said, pointing to them.

The other two were also distributed. After eating his share Bhagavan began to feel comfortable and leaned back, closing his eyes. Nobody, on this occasion, had bothered to see what had happened to Bhagavan after he vomited. No one even tried to enquire if he needed any help. But Bhagavan, showing his usual consideration, was worrying whether his vomiting had caused any inconvenience to others.[5]

Who knows what is really happening between Bhagavan and his devotees? We should be extremely wary about trying to interpret events such as these because Bhagavan usually acted in response to the states of mind of the devotees around him. Since we do not know what is passing through the minds of devotees as they sit or stand in Bhagavan's presence, we cannot

[5] Bhagavan was initially reluctant to eat the oranges at all. The following account of the incident comes from *Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 11th September, 1946. In this version the attendant is Rangaswami. It is possible that both attendants were on duty and with Bhagavan at the time:

'It seems that Rangaswami was trying to coax Bhagavan into eating an orange about noon and, when he told Bhagavan, "These oranges and other fruits are all brought by devotees only so that Bhagavan may use them. So why should not Bhagavan use them?"

'It seems Bhagavan replied, "Why should you think that I eat only when I eat with this mouth? I eat through a thousand mouths." Rangaswami told me of this.

'Today Mr T. P. Ramachandra Iyer arrived from Madras. Bhagavan said on seeing him, "You have gone down very much. You look a different man."

'T. P. R. said, "My foot became swollen. The doctors couldn't diagnose it properly. Besides, I have had a lot of strain."

'Bhagavan is criticised by some as being so impersonal and abstracted that he cannot appeal to most people. I record this instance to refute such criticism. That one remark of Bhagavan must have meant so much to T. P. R. Many others, including myself, have had such proofs of love and attention from Bhagavan.'

really ever be sure that we understand why Bhagavan responds to them in the way he does.

His attitude towards giving out teachings illustrates this very well. A lot of people are under the impression that Bhagavan talked advaitic philosophy all the time and prescribed self-enquiry to everyone who asked for his advice. This is simply not so: Bhagavan gave out different advice to different people. He would see their level of development and their temperament and react accordingly. One devotee might ask a question and be given an answer. If another devotee asked the same question a few minutes later, he might give a different answer, so different in fact that it would contradict the first one. If each of these devotees acted on Bhagavan's advice, with full faith in its efficacy, each would find that Bhagavan's grace was flowing into him.

I can give a good illustration of Bhagavan's giving out contradictory advice by recounting two incidents that happened in the hall. A blind devotee called Kannappa once came to Bhagavan.

While talking about this Kannappa, Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'Those who listen to his singing will forget the difference between day and night'.

'Then why does he not sing?' I asked.

Kannappa then sang some songs from the *Tiruppugazh* of Arunagirinatha. His singing was very sweet and his devotion brought tears to our eyes. We completely forgot ourselves. Soon afterwards the bell rang for lunch. Sri Bhagavan got up and rubbed his knees. Before he had a chance to leave, I told him how impressed I had been with the singing.

'How beautifully he sang! What melody and what devotion!' I said.

'Not only that, he can imitate anyone,' said Bhagavan as he was crossing the hall.

Before he left he turned back towards me and added, 'Yes, he sang beautifully. But what is it to us? If we get immersed in that devotion we will be carried away. Then it will be difficult for us to get out of it.'

On another occasion the famous singer Sri Dilip Kumar Roy came from Pondicherry and sang beautifully before Sri Bhagavan.

When the bell rang for lunch, Sri Roy put down his instrument,

put his palms together in a gesture of respect and said to Bhagavan, 'I do not practise any yoga, nor do I know any philosophy. All I know is singing. My heart and my emotions have merged in this music. I want to reach God's feet by following this path. Do I have any hope? All I have is this little devotion, and that too I get only through singing.'

Bhagavan replied, 'Yes, it is enough. It will take you to higher levels.'

When I translated these words for Sri Roy, he felt so buoyed up by them, he touched Bhagavan's feet again and again.

After he had left the hall Bhagavan turned towards me and said, '*Bhakti* is the mother of *jnana*. Tell him that.'

I called to Roy and translated this additional remark for him. It pleased him so much, he again repeatedly touched Bhagavan's feet.[6]

In Kannappa's case Sri Bhagavan cautioned us against devotional emotion, whereas in Roy's case he said that *bhakti* was enough. Bhagavan had the ability to discern which path would benefit each devotee. He would encourage us all to follow the path he knew would be easiest for us, and in the process he would occasionally discourage us from digressing into other forms of *sadhana*.

I can remember another occasion when Bhagavan made a remark that was so unusual, it was clearly meant for one devotee alone. When the ashram Post Office was opened, a high official

[6] A few days before this incident Dilip Kumar Roy himself spoke to Bhagavan about the difference between *bhakti* and *jnana*:

'[Dilip Kumar Roy] asked Bhagavan, "In *Maha Yoga* you say that the sages have not said anything to contradict each other. Yet we find one advocating *bhakti*, another *jnana*, etc, leading thus to all kinds of quarrels."

'Bhagavan [replied]: "There is really nothing contradictory in such teachings. When for instance a follower of *bhakti marga* declares that *bhakti* is the best, he really means by the word *bhakti* what the *jnana marga* man calls *jnana*. There is no difference in the state or its description by attributes or transcendence of attributes. Only different thinkers have used different words. All these different *margas* or paths or *sadhanas* lead to the same goal. When that happens, *dhyana*, *bhakti* or *jnana*, which were at one time a conscious and painful effort, become the normal and natural state, spontaneously and without effort." ' (*Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 29th October, 1945.)

A few days later, on the morning of 2nd November, Dilip Kumar

of the postal department, whose only son had died, came with his wife to the ashram. He spoke to Bhagavan about his loss.

'We loved the boy very much. After his death we have known neither happiness nor peace. We have been wandering aimlessly ever since. We have only one desire left, but our attachment to it is deep. Can we see our son in our next birth?'

Everyone in the hall laughed.

On hearing us react in this way, the official said, 'I have never been to any ashram before, nor do I know how to talk to *mahatmas*. If what I said was wrong, please excuse me.'

Bhagavan, who had been leaning back on his sofa, sat up and spoke to him.

'First learn the proper meaning and relationship of father,

Roy sang a few songs and then asked Bhagavan to tell him which path he should follow:

'"What is the best way of killing the ego?"

'[Bhagavan replied,] "To ask the mind to kill the mind is like making the thief the policeman. He will go with you and pretend to catch the thief, but nothing will be gained. So you must turn inward and see where the mind rises from and then it will cease to exist.

'"To each person that way is the best which appears easiest or appeals most. All the ways are equally good, as they lead to the same goal, which is the merging of the ego in the Self. What the *bhakta* calls surrender, the man who does *vichara* calls *jnana*. Both are trying to take the ego back to the source from which it sprang and make it merge there."

'[Dilip Kumar Roy,] "But which is the best way for me? Bhagavan must know."

'Bhagavan did not reply. [Devaraja Mudaliar comments:] "This is only usual with Bhagavan. He leaves it to each devotee to find out what *sadhana* appears most easy to him.'" (*Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 2nd November and 11th November, 1945.)

It seems that Bhagavan finally recommended that Dilip Kumar Roy follow the *bhakti* path later that day. T. P. Ramachandra Iyer has Bhagavan giving out this advice privately to him in the hall around lunch time. Devaraja Mudaliar has Bhagavan giving the advice publicly in the hall later that day. It would seem from these reports that Bhagavan, following his usual practice, first recommended self-enquiry, but when he realised that Dilip Kumar Roy was more inclined towards the devotional approach, gave him his permission to follow the path of *bhakti*.

son and rebirth. If you know this, you can then think of the next birth.'

The gentleman raised an objection.

'Bhagavan, I know nothing about all these things, nor do I need them. I never bother about *jnana* or renunciation. Just tell me this. I do not expect anything more from you. Will I be able to see my son in my next birth?'

Bhagavan leaned forward, raised his hands, as if to assure the man, and replied, 'Yes, you will see him. In your next birth you will see your son as clearly as you saw him in this birth.'

This remark made the man extremely happy.

'Yes, Bhagavan,' he said, 'that is what I wanted.'

He touched Bhagavan's feet many times and went away in a very contented mood.

After he had left I said, 'Bhagavan, why did you speak like this? How is it possible?'

Bhagavan replied, 'What can I do? If I had not spoken in this way, his faith would have been shattered to its foundations.'

I was still sceptical. To clear my doubts, Bhagavan asked me to get a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He showed me the following verse and asked me to read it.

> Knowledge should be given according to one's ability to grasp it. If we teach philosophy to those who are not ready to receive it, their faith will be totally shattered.

In such cases it is relatively easy to understand why Bhagavan behaved in a particular way. But there were exchanges in the hall that were far more mysterious and which may never be explained. One man, for example, came all the way from America to see Bhagavan. He sat in front of him for three hours and then went away with no intention of coming back.

I asked Bhagavan, 'What is this? He came here all the way from such a far-off place and stayed only for three hours. What did he learn?'

Bhagavan replied, 'He came for a particular purpose. He had my *darshan* and I had his *darshan*. His mission was over. Why should he stay any longer?'

I doubt if anyone will ever know what happened during those three hours. The man himself left without even leaving his name,

and Bhagavan declined to make any further comment on the incident.

Some aspects of Bhagavan's character never changed, irrespective of who he was dealing with. He abhorred waste of any kind; he was unusually considerate to the animals that lived near him, and he could always be depended on to insist that any food donations be shared out equally amongst all those present in the ashram. These habits were deeply ingrained and they were never influenced by the fluctuating minds of the people around him. Another habit, which was equally constant but less well known, was his insistence that the ashram should never ask visitors or devotees for money. Instead, he expected the ashram to be run on voluntary contributions. Chinnaswami was aware of Bhagavan's attitude to money, but he could not resist occasionally asking for money when money was needed. I witnessed one dramatic episode of this kind in the 1940s.

The Mother's temple was being built in the ashram, but there was an acute shortage of funds. Money was needed immediately. At that time a devotee called Chhaganlal Yogi came from Bombay for the first time.

When Chinnaswami saw him he told me, 'We need Rs 50,000 for the temple. So why don't the three of us go to Jamnalal Bajaj and ask him for the money? You should introduce me to Chhaganlal Yogi so that we can begin.'

Chhaganlal Yogi found the proposal to be unacceptable, but since he was a newcomer and was feeling rather shy, he felt that he had no alternative but to accept. Chinnaswami himself arranged for his luggage to be sent, but before we could depart we had to cross the hurdle of informing Bhagavan. Chinnaswami never came before Bhagavan to speak. If he needed to give information to Bhagavan he always used to send someone else to convey it. On this occasion he called me and asked me to tell Bhagavan about our journey.

'How can I tell Bhagavan about such a thing?' I asked. 'You must also come with me.'

Since he did not even have the courage to convey the information in my company, I collected some other devotees and went to see Bhagavan while he was having his afternoon rest. Bhagavan, who was alone in the hall, was gazing into space. We stood before him for some time, but he did not even bother to look at us.

Each one of us wanted one of the others to speak. Eventually, Mouni Swami spoke on our behalf, telling Bhagavan what we had come for.

For a long time Bhagavan made no reply, but at last he turned to us and said, 'I have already told you not to beg in my name. Now I am telling you again. Be satisfied with what you have. What is to happen will happen.

'If you now go and ask for money, will not the donors ask you whether you took my consent or not and whether I gave you permission for this? What do you intend to tell them if they ask questions like this?'

Chhaganlal Yogi had found the excuse he was looking for.

'Unless we tell them that you consented to this, none of them will give even a *paisa* [one hundreth of a rupee],' he said.

What could they do? One by one they slipped out of the hall and Chinnaswami's journey was cancelled.

After this incident Bhagavan remarked, 'Did all these buildings in the ashram come up as a result of my begging? It all happened in the way it had to happen. Nothing happens purely as a result of personal effort.'

The temple was eventually constructed over the *samadhi* of Bhagavan's mother on a grand scale. It was a massive and impressive building that was constructed in the traditional way by skilled temple workers. Though Bhagavan fully supported the building project in all its phases, it seems that he did not envisage that such a building would come into existence at the time the Mother passed away. This became clear to me when Bhagavan told me a little-known story about the Mother's *samadhi* that showed how destiny must always take its appointed course.

When Bhagavan's mother died in 1922, he apparently said to some devotees at Skandashram, 'Take this body in the dark without making any noise and without anybody knowing about it. Make a pit in no-man's land. Bury it quickly and come back soon before dawn.'[7]

[7] I asked Kunju Swami, who took an active part in the funeral arrangements of Bhagavan's mother, whether anyone had attempted to carry out this instruction. This was his reply:

'It wasn't practical. There was a lot of work to do and many things to arrange. We needed to get the permission of the village officer and also the permission of the Bavaji Math that owned the land on which

The body was brought down the hill. While the devotees were having a lengthy discussion about where the body was to be buried, word of the burial spread in the town and many people came. The devotees eventually selected a site, buried the body and constructed a *samadhi* over it. For several days food was cooked and distributed there amongst the poor.

Chinnaswami started coming down the hill daily to perform *puja* at the Mother's *samadhi* and to make offerings there. Some of the other devotees sometimes accompanied him. Occasionally, even Bhagavan himself came down. One day a thatched shed was erected as a shelter for him. This was the beginning of Sri Ramanasramam.

In later years Bhagavan once remarked, 'I suggested that the body be buried silently before dawn. But things happened in the way they had to happen. See how many constructions have come up where a body was buried silently!'

There was one other occasion when I heard Bhagavan say that the development of the Mother's temple was all part of the unfolding of destiny. A new palanquin, which was meant to take the deity round the Mother's temple, had been brought and placed before Bhagavan. It was shown to Bhagavan and then taken away. I asked Bhagavan what it was.

'Oh, don't you know?' he replied. 'It is the palanquin for the deity. They will carry Mother's idol around the temple in it.'

After pausing for some time he added, 'Not only that, they are also getting an umbrella made for the deity.'

I wondered out loud. 'Umbrella! What umbrella?'

'The same kind of umbrella that is held over Lord Arunachaleswara during his processions. Here it is to be held over the deity in the temple. Chinnaswami is completely obsessed with the Mother and decorations for her. But everything will

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the *samadhi* pit was to be dug. The mother's body did not leave Skandashram till shortly before dawn. It was impossible to get all these things done before daybreak. Also, we wanted to do it properly. There is a tradition that if you bury a *jnani's* body in ordinary earth, it will be bad for any nearby town. It is equally bad if you cremate it. In Mother's case a special deep pit was made and lined with stones. This is the correct way, and it takes time. In Tirumular's *Tirumantiram* it says that a *jnani's* body must be buried in a pit that has been lined with stones. This is what we did.'

happen as it is destined to happen. Let us be mere onlookers.'[8]

An incident that took place during the construction of this temple once precipitated an astonishing show of grace from Sri Bhagavan. It clearly shows how Sri Bhagavan was aware of all our thoughts and it also shows how he could respond to our prayers if our devotion and faith were strong enough.

In 1945 Bhagavan either dislocated his big toe or severely sprained it. The ashram doctor recommended that Bhagavan restrict his movements for one month. He was advised only to walk between the dining room, the hall and his bathroom. Towards the end of that period, Venkatarama Iyer and I went up to him and greeted him as he was leaving the dining room. When Bhagavan asked what we had come for, we asked for his permission to go to Skandashram.

'All right,' he said, 'you can go.' Then, turning towards Rangaswami, his attendant, he asked with wistful eagerness, 'Shall we also go?'

Rangaswami was horrified. The sun was at its hottest and Bhagavan's toe had not yet fully healed.

'How can you do it, Swami?' he asked. 'You are not yet cured and you are still very weak.'[9]

Bhagavan looked at us like a helpless child and asked, 'Won't you take us along with you?'

'Bhagavan,' I answered, 'If you want to accompany us, who could deny himself such a pleasure? But what about your physical condition? How can you possibly come?'

'It seems that they will not take me,' said Bhagavan regretfully to Rangaswami.

Venkatarama Iyer and I began to climb the hill towards Skandashram. When we looked behind us we saw that Rangaswami and Bhagavan were also coming up the hill.

[8] In Tamil culture an umbrella is often a symbol of power and authority, not just a defence against the weather. When Bhagavan wrote in *Arunachala Ashtakam*, verse seven, 'The Sovereign Lord under the shade of a single umbrella', he was alluding to the omnipotence and the universal sovereignty of God.

[9] The original Telugu version of this story in *Bhagavan Smritulu* states that Bhagavan was suffering from a broken collar-bone, rather than a dislocated toe. I think Chalam, the compiler of that book, is mixing up two different accidents that Bhagavan had in the 1940s. Bhagavan did break his collar-bone in April 1942 when he tripped

Rangaswami called out to us, 'Don't worry, we are not coming with you!'

Bhagavan usually went up the hill every day, but while his toe was healing his doctors had forbidden him to walk further than the ashram dining room. When I saw Bhagavan coming towards us, I assumed that he had decided to resume his daily walk on the lower slopes of the hill.

We accompanied Bhagavan and Rangaswami for some time, but when we left them in order to continue our walk to Skandashram, Rangaswami ran up to us and said, 'After Bhagavan goes back to the hall to rest, I shall come with you. Please don't go any further. Stay somewhere near here and wait for me.'

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while trying to prevent a cat from attacking a squirrel. The injury to his toe occurred in August 1945. I have therefore taken the liberty of substituting 'toe' for 'collar-bone' in the story that follows.

A standard remedial measure for those who have broken or dislocated their big toe is to have a piece of wood about an inch thick, an inch wide and about three inches long attached to their footwear across the ball of the foot. This keeps the toe off the ground during walking. The ankle can still articulate, but the big-toe joint remains in a flat plane. Since Bhagavan never wore footwear of any kind, this option was not available to him. Without such an aid, walking would have been extremely painful for the first week or so after the accident. The walk from Ramanasramam to Skandashram is about a mile and it involves a vertical ascent of about 600 feet, all of it over uneven terrain. The current well-paved path to Skandashram had not been constructed at this time. The attendants were right to be shocked when Bhagavan announced that he intended to climb the hill in this condition.

This injury came on top of Bhagavan's already existing rheumatic problems, which were making it increasingly difficult for him to walk. The following excerpt from *Day By Day With Bhagavan* (6th November, 1945) was recorded a few weeks after the incident that T. P. Ramachandra Iyer is narrating:

'A little before Bhagavan was about to start for his evening stroll a young man approached Bhagavan and said that his companion had lost his eyesight. Bhagavan nodded, as usual. Soon after Bhagavan got up and told us, "He says he has lost his eyes. I have lost my legs. He comes and tells me. To whom am I to go and complain?" For nearly a month or more Bhagavan has been having more than usual trouble with his legs, either due to rheumatism or deficiency of B vitamin.'

We climbed a short distance up the hill and sat there in a shady place. An hour passed but Rangaswami did not arrive. Eventually we saw a man coming up. As he approached us we saw that he was the Skandashram watchman and that he was carrying food for a *sadhu* who lived there. As he passed us we asked him whether anyone else was climbing the hill. He said 'No' in a somewhat uncertain tone, so we stopped him and asked him again. After some hesitation he said in a whisper that Bhagavan was coming up the hill, accompanied by Rangaswami.

Bhagavan in that hot sun! I asked Venkatarama Iyer to sit there while I ran down to meet them. When I found them I saw that Bhagavan was tired and that he was also sweating profusely in the hot sun. He was crawling slowly over the stones and the sharp edges of the pebbles were rupturing the skin on his palms and feet. In his month of inactivity Bhagavan had lost the habit of walking, so much so that he was finding it extremely difficult to climb the hill. His big toe had not yet healed properly, but even so he did not agree when we proposed to take him down the hill. Since he was determined to carry on, Rangaswami and I caught hold of him on either side and helped him to climb the hill. After a long struggle we reached Skandashram at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. By then Bhagavan was utterly exhausted. He lay down on a stone slab gasping for breath.

An ashram worker who was whitewashing and cleaning Skandashram came, prostrated before Bhagavan and said, 'What a fortunate day for me! The all-merciful Bhagavan came up the hill all this way to give me *darshan.*'

I thought that Bhagavan would recover if we gave him something to drink, but what was available in such an isolated place?

The man said that he would go down the hill and bring something but Bhagavan stopped him and asked, 'Is there no porridge in your bowl?'

The man went and saw that there was nothing left in his bowl except a few dried pieces that were sticking to the sides. He had drunk the remainder earlier that day. We wet the sides of the pot, mixed the dried porridge with water and gave the resulting liquid to Bhagavan. It revived him and he soon recovered.

Down the hill in the ashram the doors of Bhagavan's hall were opened at 3 o'clock. When it was discovered that Bhagavan

was not there, people ran in all directions looking for him. One of them came to Skandashram, arriving just as Bhagavan was narrating to us the story of how he used to beg for his food in town.

'In those days,' he said, 'I used to walk without even a bowl in my hand. If anyone gave me anything, I used to take it in my hands, eat or drink it, and then clean my hands with my hair and walk away. There was not a single street in which I did not wander and beg.'

'Did everyone give food?' I asked.

'Some used to keep food and wait for me. Others used to give if anything was left over. Some people used to scold me, saying, "You are very strong, why don't you work?" These people used to chase me away.'

'Did you not feel bad when you were treated like this?' I asked.

'Why should I?' he replied. 'I used to go away with a smile.'[10]

The man who had come up looking for us went back down the hill to inform those in the ashram that he had found Bhagavan. The man who was whitewashing left temporarily. He went down the hill and came back with some puffed rice and *dhal* for us to eat. Seeing Bhagavan had obviously made him very happy.

Bhagavan turned to him and said, 'I came for you. Your prayer brought me here.'

I was astonished that Bhagavan had gone to so much trouble in the heat of the day merely to answer a prayer.

[10] Bhagavan elaborated on this period of his life in the following conversation with T. P. Ramachandra Iyer, Devaraja Mudaliar and G. V. Subbaramayya (*Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 30th May, 1946):

'In the afternoon T. P. Ramachandra Iyer remarked, "Chadwick has a picture of Bhagavan in a recumbent posture where Bhagavan looks a mere skeleton. I don't think anyone else has such a picture."

'I [Devaraja Mudaliar] said, "It must have been taken at the time when Bhagavan was purposely under-eating."

'Bhagavan said, "Yes, for some time when I was at Skandashram I used to take only one meal at 11 a.m. and nothing else. At that time I got very thin."

'In connection with this, G. V. S. asked Bhagavan about his early days and whether he ever went about accepting alms. Then Bhagavan related how it was T. P. Ramachandra Iyer's father who first took him by sheer force to his house and fed him, and how the first time he

'What was his prayer?' I asked.

'Don't you know?' enquired Bhagavan.

When it became clear that we did not, he narrated the whole story.

A hall was being built for Bhagavan in front of Mother's temple. Four days previously the ashram priests had decided to do a *puja* to bless and sanctify four pillars that had recently been erected there. On that day, with the doctor's consent, the temple architect had taken Bhagavan and had made him sit before the pillars. A big crowd collected there to watch. Our hero, the whitewashing man, was also in the crowd.

After the *puja,* when Bhagavan was going away, it seems that he thought, 'Those who build this temple are important people, so Bhagavan came to see their work. How will Bhagavan see my work and devotion in Skandashram? It is a long distance for him to walk. Why should he come now?'

After narrating this story Bhagavan answered his prayer by inspecting his work.

A little later he came back and said to us, 'A message will soon come from the ashram asking me to come back. Let us ignore it. We can spend the night here. At 1 a.m., after the moon has risen, we can slowly go down to the town, see the newly whitewashed temple *gopuram* in moonlight, and then go back to the ashram without making much noise.'

Bhagavan spoke like an absconding school child involved in a great conspiracy.

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begged for food was from Chinna Gurukal's wife. He went on to tell how after that he freely begged in almost all the streets of Tiruvannamalai.

'He said, "You cannot conceive of the majesty and dignity I felt while so begging. The first day, when I begged from Gurukal's wife, I felt bashful about it as a result of habits of upbringing, but after that there was absolutely no feeling of abasement. I felt like a king, and more than a king. I have sometimes received stale gruel at some house and taken it without salt or any other flavouring, in the open street, before great pandits and other important men who used to come and prostrate themselves before me, then wiped my hands on my head and passed on supremely happy and in a state of mind in which even emperors were mere straw in my sight. You can't imagine it. It is because there is such a path that we find tales in history of kings giving up their thrones and taking to this path."'

What else do we want except to be with him? However, the plan was not carried out because as soon as it became known that Bhagavan was on the hill, all the people in the ashram came up to see him. At six o'clock a big crowd had assembled. We were very disappointed that our overnight programme could not be carried out, but in a last attempt to salvage it, we asked all the devotees to go down to Ramanasramam. None of them moved.

'It is getting dark,' I said. 'There are some snakes here. So please go back to the ashram.'

'When our lamp [Bhagavan] is here, where is the darkness for us?' said Rukmini Amma.

I tried to frighten the devotees with stories of tigers and wolves. I tried to tell them that being stranded on the hill in total darkness with no food would be dangerous, but no one was inclined to believe me. Or if they did, they were prepared to risk all the dangers so long as Bhagavan was with them.

Bhagavan knew that it was pointless to argue any more. He got up and we went down via the eastern slope of the hill. We reached the ashram at about 9 p.m. that night.

[Editor's note: Bhagavan's visit to Skandashram took place on 27th September, 1945. Devaraja Mudaliar's description of the visit, taken from Day By Day With Bhagavan, *reveals what a unique event it was:]*

'Bhagavan suddenly seems to have felt like visiting Skandashram where for about a week now repairs are being done; and so without notice to anybody, after the midday meal, Bhagavan, on his usual after-lunch stroll, wended his way towards Skandashram, followed by attendant Rangaswami. Few knew about this till about 3.30 p.m. But after 3.30 the news gradually spread and almost all the devotees went up to Skandashram and found Bhagavan seated on the terraced platform in front, which overlooks the temple and town. We found Bhagavan in very good spirits and relating various events and incidents that happened during his stay there previous to his coming to Ramanasramam. Bhagavan had a mind even to continue stopping there and to spend the night there. But all the devotees had thronged there and none looked likely to move till Bhagavan moved. So at about 5.30 p.m. Bhagavan started,

looked at the various parts of the ashram, telling us where he used to sleep, where he used to sit, where they cooked, where the old tap was, and so on, and then got down by the steps. On the way he visited Virupaksha Cave and explained about his life there also....

'It is a marvel that Bhagavan did this trip all on foot in this way, the more so because his left big toe had become either dislocated or badly sprained on 26th August and as a result thereof [he] is still having some pain there.

'Since Bhagavan left Skandashram [in 1922], he had gone there two or three times within about a year or two after his settling down here. But after that, i.e. for nearly twenty two years now, he has never gone there till today.'

Chhaganlal V. Yogi

A Personal Encounter

What does Sri Bhagavan mean to me? After many years of experiencing his grace I can now reply, 'He is everything to me. He is my Guru and my God.' I can say this with confidence because, had I not had the good fortune of seeing him and thereafter getting into closer contact with him, I would have been still groping in the dark. I would still have been a doubting Thomas.

How did it all begin? When I was eighteen I read a lot of books by Swami Vivekananda and Swami Rama Tirtha. This reading generated a desire in me that I should also become a *sannyasin*, like the authors of these books. Their writings also implanted in me the ideal of plain living, high thinking, and a life dedicated to spiritual matters. Somehow, my desire to become a *sannyasin* was never fulfilled, but the ideal of a dedicated life made a deeper and deeper impression on my mind. At the age of twenty I had the good fortune of contacting Mahatma Gandhi. His ideals won my heart and for several years I faithfully tried to put them into practice.

I was doing my duty to the best of my ability and leading, as best I could, a pure and dedicated life till the age of thirty-eight. Around that time scepticism began to assail me and my mind became a home for all kinds of doubts. I began to doubt the ideals of Gandhiji; I began to doubt *sadhus* and *sannyasins*; I doubted religion, and I began to doubt the existence of God.

It was in this darkest period of my life that I first heard of Sri Ramana Maharshi. At that time I seemed to be heading swiftly towards total scepticism. The world appeared to me to be full of injustice, cruelty, greed, hate and other evils, the existence of which logically led me to a strong disbelief in God. For, I argued, had He truly existed, could anything dark or evil ever have flourished? Doubt upon doubt assailed me like dark shadows that dogged my footsteps. I had, as a consequence, lost whatever little reverence I might have had for *sadhus* and *sannyasins*. I found myself slowly but surely losing my interest in religion.

The very word itself eventually became a synonym in my mind for a clever ruse to delude the credulous of the world. In short, I began to live a life lacking in optimism and faith. I was not happy in my disbelief, for my mind took on the aspect of turbulent waters, and I felt that all around me there was raging a scorching fire that seemed to burn up my very entrails.

One day, while travelling as usual on the train to the office, I happened to meet a friend who had spent over a decade in Europe and America. I hadn't met him for quite a long time and I sometimes used to wonder where he had disappeared to. In answer to a query about his recent activities he said that he had been to Sri Ramanasramam and immediately launched into a description of what went on there. While he was trying to describe to me his experience of the *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan he drew out from his pocket a small packet that he extended to me. I wondered what it contained. He explained that it contained something extremely precious – some *vibhuti*, holy ashes brought from the ashram. He insisted on my accepting them. His kind invitation did not interest me in the least. On the other hand, it amused me.

I said, scornfully, 'Pardon me, but I think that all this sort of thing is mere sham and humbug, so I trust you will not misunderstand me if I refuse to accept'.

He then argued that by refusing his gift, I was not merely insulting him, I was also insulting the *vibhuti*.

I thought that this was rather comical, but to placate him I replied, 'Well, if that be so, to please you I will take a pinch of these ashes on condition that you will allow me to do whatever I like with them'.

Unsuspectingly, he nodded his head in assent and passed the packet over to me. A smile appeared on his lips as he watched me take a pinch out of it. This smile was the preface to a zealous lecture on Sri Bhagavan and his miraculous greatness. While he was lost in his missionary enthusiasm, I surreptitiously let the ashes fall onto the floor of the compartment. To be quite frank, it was a relief when my friend had concluded what I had then considered to be a puerile and unnecessary lecture.

At the end of it I remarked, 'I have an utter contempt for these so-called saints'.

My friend refused to give up. He insisted on impressing on me that Sri Ramana Maharshi was not a 'so-called' saint, but an

authentic sage, acknowledged as such by great savants all over the world. He suggested that for my own benefit I read about him in some of the available literature. To start me off he gave me a book entitled *Sri Maharshi* that had been written by Sri Kamath, the editor of *The Sunday Times* in Madras.

I must confess that despite my prejudices the book evoked in me an interest in Sri Bhagavan. After completing this small book I was sufficiently curious to borrow another book about him from a different friend. It was the second edition of *Self-Realization*, the earliest full-length biography of Sri Bhagavan. From then on, my interest grew without my being aware of it. A little later I felt compelled to write to Sri Ramanasramam to ask for all the literature on Sri Bhagavan that was available in English. As I began to study it with great avidity, I found that my outlook on life began to undergo a subtle transformation, but only a partial one. At the back of my mind there still lurked a heavy doubt, resembling a cloud, that stained the gathering illumination. My old scepticism did not wish to yield place so easily to this new faith, which was apparently being inculcated in my mind.

My scepticism tried to challenge my new faith by arguing, 'So many books are wonderful to read, but their authors, more often than not, are not as wonderful to know. It is possible for men to teach truths that they are unable to live themselves. What, then, is the use of books, however wonderful?'

To counter this doubt I decided to correspond directly with Sri Bhagavan. Over the next few months I wrote several letters to him, all of which were answered by his ashram with a rare punctuality. However, although they breathed the teachings of the Master, they hardly gave me a glimpse into the nature of the daily life lived by him. Because of this I began to be haunted by a desire to visit the ashram to see for myself what went on there.

To fulfil that desire I paid my first visit to Sri Ramanasramam in the Christmas holidays of 1939. At first I was terribly disappointed because nothing seemed to strike me in the way I had expected. I found Sri Bhagavan seated on a couch, as quiet and unmoving as a statue. His presence did not seem to emanate anything unusual, and I was very disappointed to discover that he displayed no interest in me at all. I had expected warmth and intimacy, but unfortunately I seemed to be in the presence

of someone who lacked both. From morning till evening I sat waiting to catch a glimpse of his grace, of his interest in me, a stranger who had come all the way from Bombay, but I evoked no response. Sri Bhagavan merely seemed cold and unaffected. After pinning such hopes on him, his apparent lack of interest nearly broke my heart. Eventually, I decided to leave the ashram, knowing full well that if I did so, I would be more sceptical and hard-headed than before.

The *Veda parayana* was chanted every evening in Sri Bhagavan's presence. It was considered to be one of the most attractive items in the daily programme of the ashram, but in my depressed state it fell flat on my ears. It was the evening of the day I had decided to leave. The sun was setting like a sad farewell, spreading a darkness over both the hill and my heart. The gloom deepened until the neighbourhood disappeared into the blackness of the night. In my sensitive state the electric light that was switched on in the hall seemed like a living wound on the body of the darkness. My mind, which was deeply tormented, felt that the psychic atmosphere in the hall was stuffy and choking. Unable to bear it any longer, I walked outside to get a breath of fresh air.

A young man called Gopalan came up to me and asked me where I had come from.

'Bombay,' I replied.

He asked me if I had been introduced to the Master, and when I replied that I had not, he was most surprised. He immediately led me to the office, introduced me to the *sarvadhikari* [manager] and then proceeded with me to the hall where he introduced me to Sri Bhagavan. When he heard my name Sri Bhagavan's eyes turned to me, looked straight into mine and twinkled like stars. With a smile beaming with grace he asked me if I were a Gujarati. I replied that I was. Immediately he sent for a copy of the Gujarati translation by Sri Kishorelal Mashruwala of *Upadesa Saram*, a few copies of which had only just arrived. He then asked me to chant the Gujarati verses from the book.

'But I am not a singer,' I answered, hesitating to begin. But when it became clear that I was expected to perform, I got over my initial hesitation and began to chant verses from the book. I had sung about fifteen when the bell for the evening meal rang. All the time I was chanting I could feel Sri Bhagavan keenly

observing me. It seemed that the light of his eyes was suffusing my consciousness, even without my being aware of it. His silent gaze brought about a subtle but definite transformation in me. The darkness, which a few minutes before had seemed heavy and unbearable, gradually lightened and melted into a glow of well being. My erstwhile sadness completely disappeared, leaving in my heart an inexplicable emotion of joy. My limbs appeared to have been washed in an ocean-tide of freedom.

That evening I sat close to Sri Bhagavan in the dining room. In my exalted state the food I ate seemed to have an unusual and unearthly taste. I quite literally felt that I was participating in some heavenly meal in the direct presence of God. After having such an experience I of course abandoned all thought of leaving the ashram that night. I stayed on for three days longer in order to widen the sacred and extraordinary experience that had already begun, an experience of divine grace that I felt would lead me in the direction of spiritual liberation.

During the three days of my stay in the proximity of the Divine Master, I found my whole outlook entirely changed. After that short period I could find little evidence of my old self, a self that had been tied down with all kinds of preconceptions and prejudices. I felt that I had lost the chains that bind the eyes of true vision. I became aware that the whole texture of my mind had undergone a change. The colours of the world seemed different, and even the ordinary daylight took on an ethereal aspect. I began to see the foolishness and the futility of turning my gaze only on the dark side of life.

In those few days Sri Bhagavan, the divine magician, opened up for me a strange new world of illumination, hope and joy. I felt that his presence on earth alone constituted sufficient proof that humanity, suffering and wounded because of its obstinate ignorance, could be uplifted and saved. For the first time I fully understood the significance of *darshan*.

While I lay in bed in the guest room of the ashram, the encounter that had taken place on the train in Bombay replayed itself in my mind. I recalled the blind audacity that had prompted me to drop the thrice-holy *vibhuti* in contempt onto the floor of the railway carriage. Today, even one speck of such *vibhuti* is a treasure to me, for *prasad* received from the Master is a form of grace that no wealth on earth may buy. Sometimes I even feel

that I am not worthy enough to raise it to my eyelids and streak my forehead with it.

'O Master,' I thought to myself, 'what a miracle of transformation! Why did it take half a lifetime before I could meet you? Half a lifetime of blundering, of failing and falling. But I suppose, my Master, that you would say that time is a mental concept. For I feel that in your sight your *bhaktas* [devotees] have, throughout all time, always been with you and near you.'

As these thoughts were passing through my mind, I slowly fell into a deep sleep. The next morning I arose in a rejuvenated state. There was a new vigour in my limbs and an awareness that my heart was permeated with light. On the third day of my visit I sadly took leave of Sri Bhagavan. I was still human enough, still caught in the sense of time and space, for the parting to leave me with a feeling of aching and emptiness in the heart. But there was no despair. Something assured me that I would be returning to the feet of the Master sooner than I could imagine.

My intuition turned out to be correct. In the following years repeated visits seemed to be miraculously and easily arranged by the Master. He seemed to know that I felt an occasional need to be close to him physically. In the years that followed each succeeding visit deepened the light within, toned up my nerves and suffused my senses with an increasing experience of exhilaration.

The subtle and subconscious manner with which the Master toils at his children is amazing. There were times without number when I distinctly saw his hand, his mighty hand, extended to me when I stood in need of guidance. These occasions continually reminded me of his famous comment in *Who am I?*

> He that has earned the grace of the Guru shall undoubtedly be saved and never forsaken, just as the prey that has fallen into the tiger's jaws will never be allowed to escape.

Printing Press Stories

In 1945 I decided to wind up my printing press in Bombay in order to go and settle at Sri Ramanasramam. I had no pre-

arranged plan for closing down my business; I merely relied on Sri Bhagavan. And he in turn responded to my devout prayer.

In the early hours of the morning, while I was still in my bed and only half awake, I saw a vision in which Sri Bhagavan appeared before me. By his side stood a gentleman whom I recognised as a friend of mine. He had neither been to the ashram nor had he ever exhibited any faith in Sri Bhagavan. The following conversation then took place between Sri Bhagavan and myself:

Bhagavan: You want to sell your press, don't you?

Me: Yes, Bhagavan, but I must find a buyer.

Bhagavan: (showing my friend standing by his side) Here is the buyer. He will buy your press, so sell it to him.

Me: Since Sri Bhagavan has been kind enough to show me the buyer, may he also favour me by stating the amount at which I should execute the sale?

Sri Bhagavan then showed me five figures on the opposite wall that were shining like a neon sign. The amount indicated to me was quite reasonable, neither low nor exorbitant.

Sri Bhagavan and my friend then disappeared from my sight and the vision ended. By itself the vision was astonishing enough, but there was more to come. When I entered my press that day at 11 a.m., my friend from the vision was waiting there for me. Of course, he had come to see me about some other work and had no idea that he had been singled out as a prospective buyer. Feeling that Sri Bhagavan had sent him to me, I told him about the vision that had come to me a few hours before. He listened to me very attentively.

When I had finished my tale he simply commented, 'I will buy your press at the price indicated by your Guru'.

There was no limit to my joy. My desire to sell was fulfilled by his grace and the sale was completed in less than a minute.

My original plan had been to sell all my property in Bombay and move directly to Sri Ramanasramam. However, when the devotees heard what I was planning to do, it was suggested to me that I could be of more use to the ashram in Bangalore. I was asked to start a printing press there that could execute all of Sri Ramanasramam's printing work. I agreed to the idea and soon found myself in Bangalore, looking for suitable premises.

I began to suspect that Sri Bhagavan had assisted the sale of my original press because he had work for me to do in Bangalore.

I was a stranger in the city but I soon located an old press that had been lying idle for the previous six months. It was for sale. I saw its proprietor and told him why I wished to buy his business. He agreed to sell it to me but we were unable to agree on a price. To break the deadlock I proposed that both of us should visit the ashram and suggested that we could talk about the deal after we had had Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. I thought that since Sri Bhagavan wanted me to do this work in Bangalore, his *darshan* might help to lubricate the wheels of the transaction.

The owner agreed to the idea, so we set off together for Sri Ramanasramam. On our arrival, I took him into the holy presence of Sri Bhagavan and informed him that I proposed to buy the press of the gentleman who was accompanying me, and that I planned to do all the ashram's printing work there. Sri Bhagavan did not say anything; he just nodded his head.

Within a few hours of having had Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*, there was a wonderful change in the attitude of the owner of the press. He approached me and agreed to sell his press for whatever price I was willing to pay for it. I stated a reasonable amount since I did not want to exploit him, and he happily accepted my offer. When he had agreed to come and see Sri Bhagavan with me he had made a stipulation that no business talks should take place at the ashram. However, after seeing Sri Bhagavan, he proposed that we settle our business immediately. We drafted and signed a sale agreement in the ashram itself and within a week of our visit the press came into my possession.

It was a fairly big press that enabled me to do all kinds of printing work in several languages. Because of the good facilities that were available there, I undertook to print ashram books in English, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada.

The press, which was given the name 'Aruna Press' by Sri Bhagavan himself, had been idle for six months. It needed a lot of work to get it functioning again, but by Sri Bhagavan's grace I was soon able to take up the ashram work that had been given to me.

In 1946, the devotees of Sri Bhagavan decided to celebrate a golden jubilee to commemorate Sri Bhagavan's fifty years at Arunachala. He had arrived on September 1st, 1896, and on that same date in 1946 the ashram proposed to mark the

occasion by a number of special events, one of which was the publication of a book entitled *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir*. The printing of this souvenir was entrusted to my press. Up till then, the press had only printed small books for the ashram. Since this was going to be a big volume of several hundred pages, I was initially reluctant to accept the work because I felt that I would not have enough time to complete it. However, once I overcame my diffidence and accepted the commission, help and cooperation began to pour in. Since some of it was wholly unexpected, I suspected that Sri Bhagavan's divine grace was again at work.

At first, my initial fears appeared to be justified. When only ten days remained before the publication date, I had still not managed to print more than a small part of the book. I temporarily lost my courage and rushed off to the ashram.

I prostrated before Sri Bhagavan, told him about the lack of progress and informed him, 'Unless the help of some other press is taken, the volume will not come out on the first of September'.

I then sat before him, enjoying his *darshan*, waiting for his reply.

After a few moments of silence he said in a low melodious tone, 'Do your work'.

These three simple words had a magical effect on me. They fired me with fresh vim and vigour and there arose in my heart a strong belief that the volume would surely be out on the scheduled date. I had received my orders from my Master. I had simply to obey and 'do my work'. I had faith that all the other details would be looked after by him.

I returned to Bangalore and told the story of my experience at Sri Ramanasramam to my co-workers in the press. All of them accepted Sri Bhagavan's order in the same spirit as I had done. For the next few days all of us worked day and night with full faith, zeal and enthusiasm. The amount of work turned out in those last ten days was, in retrospect, quite astonishing. Then, when three days remained till our deadline, a party of about ten devotees came to my house on its way to the ashram. They were going there to attend the golden jubilee celebrations. Three of them turned out to be expert bookbinders. I immediately enlisted their aid and managed to complete the work of the souvenir a day early.

Between 1945 and 1947 the Aruna Press printed all the

publications of Sri Ramanasramam. The work was complex and I often found myself having to argue with the official at Sri Ramanasramam who had been put in charge of the publications there. The tension between us increased to the point where both of us decided that we should go to Sri Bhagavan to get our differences resolved.

The rest interval between noon and 2.30 p.m. was chosen for our meeting because we wanted to be alone with him. We went to the hall at noon and waited outside for him to return from lunch. On his way back he saw both of us waiting for him. Sensing that we had some business to discuss, he took his seat on the big stone couch that stood outside the hall. My friend immediately started to present his side of the dispute. However, it soon occurred to him that Sri Bhagavan was not comfortable sitting outside on this stone bench. He stopped in the middle of his plea, folded his hands in a respectful way, and requested Sri Bhagavan to go inside the hall. He said that the business should be conducted with Sri Bhagavan seated comfortably on his sofa.

Sri Bhagavan dismissed the appeal with a smile, saying, 'What is wrong with this seat? Was there a soft bed and a sofa when I was up there [pointing to the hill]? Up there the bare stones served as my bed as well as my seat.'

It was clear that in our unseemly haste and our anxiety to plead our respective cases we had been responsible for causing this discomfort to him. Feeling very guilty about this, I felt very embarrassed when my friend's request was turned down. In an anguished voice I begged Sri Bhagavan to follow the advice.

'No, Bhagavan, no. That won't do,' I said. 'It is our earnest prayer that you should not sit here in the hot sun. We will resume our talk only after you go into the hall and sit comfortably on the sofa.'

This time he accepted the advice. Neither of us knew why he finally agreed after rejecting the first appeal. He got up, went inside and, as requested, sat on his sofa. Both of us then placed our cases before him. He quietly listened to us and gave his verdict in the language of silence. Smiling with great charm he maintained complete silence both during and after the presentation of the arguments. The judgement was the best possible one for both of us. Sri Bhagavan's silence had healed the breach. As we emerged from the hall both of us had a spontaneous impulse to embrace the other. In those few minutes

our hearts had changed. We separated with the resolve to bury the past and to treat each other in future with love and friendship. The silken tie with which Sri Bhagavan bound us on that day has never snapped again.

Visions

Sometimes in life there is a clash between two competing obligations, especially if both seem to be equally important. At such times it is rather difficult to arrive at the right decision. It has been my experience that at such times our gracious Master leads us to the proper decision. I will give an example from my own life.

At one time I felt that my political duty as a Gandhian demanded that I should court arrest,[1] but my domestic duties bade me otherwise. As I was eager to go to jail as part of the Independence struggle, it pained me that, out of regard for my family, I was not able to do so. I found myself in a dilemma and I could not of my own accord see the way out. The situation was so unbearable for me that I had to turn to the Master for help and relief. I therefore set out for Tiruvannamalai.

After reaching there I went and sat in the holy presence of the Master. While I was sitting there, I began to wonder how I should place my difficulty before him because I did not feel like broaching the subject verbally. I finally decided to pour forth my prayer from my heart in silence in the form of a plea for Sri Bhagavan to extend his benign help to me. I began to pray and while I concentrated on my mental plea I watched his radiant face and his sparkling eyes that were full of love and kindness. And then, astonishingly, something like a miracle began to happen. Sri Bhagavan's face transformed itself into that of Mahatma Gandhi, while his body remained the same. As I stared at it with awe and wonder, the two faces, those of Sri Bhagavan and Gandhiji, began to appear to me alternately in quick succession. I felt my heart filling with joy and yet at the same time I was wondering whether what I saw was real or not. I

[1] During British rule it was common for Indians seeking Independence to protest by committing acts of civil disobedience that were illegal, thus compelling the British rulers to arrest and imprison them. This course of action was known as 'courting arrest'.

turned my eyes away from Sri Bhagavan and looked around me to see if others were seeing what I saw. Seeing no sign of wonder on their faces, I concluded that what I saw was a picture from my own imagination. I closed my eyes and sat quietly for some time. Then, as I began again to look at Sri Bhagavan's face, the vision immediately reappeared, but this time with a slight change. In addition to the two faces of Sri Bhagavan and Gandhiji, those of Krishna, Buddha, Kabir, Ramdas and a host of other saints began to show themselves in quick succession. Now all my doubts vanished and I began to enjoy this grand and divine show. The vision lasted about five minutes. My mind dropped all its worries and I found myself able to hand over my problem to the capable hands of the Master. Though he spoke no words to me, it came to pass that the problem was solved without infringing either of my two duties. In fact, both duties were fulfilled satisfactorily.

I had another vision of Sri Bhagavan in 1943. During my visit to Sri Ramanasramam that year, I visited the temple of Sri Arunachaleswara with my family and a friend who was a devotee from Madurai. This is the main temple in Tiruvannamalai, the same one that Sri Bhagavan stayed in when he first came to Arunachala.

While we were walking through the spacious courtyards I did not have any inkling of the wonderful experience I was to pass through when I finally saw the deity.

On reaching the innermost shrine we discovered that we were early, for the doors of the shrine had not been opened. We decided to wait there till someone came to unlock them. I leaned back against a pillar and began to think about Sri Bhagavan's early life. Suddenly my thoughts began to materialise physically as scenes from his early life began to appear before my eyes as vividly as if I were watching a cinema film.

The film had the following scenes, all of which I saw very clearly: Venkataraman is writing the imposition in his uncle's house in Madurai. Leaving it aside, he sits bolt upright, closes his eyes and becomes absorbed in the more congenial practice of meditation. His elder brother Nagaswami is watching him and rebukes him for neglecting his lessons. Venkataraman then decides to leave the house. He takes three rupees from his brother's college fees and departs after leaving a short note. He

reaches the railway station. He buys a ticket to Tindivanam, gets into the train and sits quietly in one corner. A *moulvi* [Muslim scholar] who is discoursing to other passengers notices him and asks him where he is going. On learning that Venkataraman has got a ticket to Tindivanam but wants to go on to Tiruvannamalai, the *moulvi* directs him to break his journey at Villupuram. I see Venkataraman getting down at Villupuram and walking through the town in search of food. He waits near a hotel whose meals are not yet ready. Meanwhile he loses himself in *samadhi*. When the meal is ready, he takes it, offers to pay for it, but the hotel owner refuses payment. He then goes to the railway station and buys a ticket to Mambalapattu. From there he walks for about ten miles and reaches the temple of Araiyaninallur. In the temple he sees a vision of dazzling light and goes into *samadhi* again. He then goes to Kilur, where he pledges his earrings and gets four rupees for them. With this money he goes to the railway station and buys a ticket to Tiruvannamalai.

While I was enjoying this wonderful divine vision, the doors of the shrine opened and my vision was interrupted by the loud blowing of pipes and the beating of drums. The people who were waiting with us stood up to get the Lord's *darshan*. I too mechanically stood up with the others. After this short interruption, my vision continued. Though the idol of Sri Arunachaleswara was before my eyes, I could clearly see Venkataraman getting out of the train at the Tiruvannamalai station. He then ran towards the temple. As he was coming nearer and nearer, the noisy music rose to a higher and higher pitch. Venkataraman entered the temple, ran to the shrine and embraced the *lingam* with both his hands. My feelings were ecstatic. My whole body experienced a divine thrill and tears of joy rolled down my cheeks. This state of sublime joy lasted a long time and was both indescribable and unforgettable.[2]

[2] It is not widely known that Bhagavan did, on his arrival in the temple in 1896, embrace the Arunachaleswara *lingam*. All the major biographies of Bhagavan state that he merely stood in front of it. Bhagavan himself was initially reluctant to have this story made public. Since he was not a priest of the temple, the temple administration might have regarded the embrace as a provocative and ritually contaminating act that could only have been cancelled out by having an elaborate ceremony [*kumbhabhishekam*] to reconsecrate the *lingam*.

I am not the only person to have had a vision of Sri Bhagavan in the inner shrine of the temple. When I printed *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir* for the ashram in 1946, I discovered that a devotee from Nepal, Sardar Rudra Raj Pande, had had an equally spectacular experience there. This is how he described it:

> [When I reached the centre of the temple,] all my attention was directed to the one purpose of seeing the image or *lingam* in the *sanctum sanctorum*. But, strange to say, instead of the *lingam* I see the image of the Maharshi, Bhagavan Sri Ramana, his smiling countenance, his brilliant eyes looking at me. And what is more strange, it is not one Maharshi that I see, nor two, nor three – in hundreds I see the same smiling countenance, those lustrous eyes. I see them wherever I may look in that *sanctum sanctorum*. My eyes catch not the full figure of the Maharshi, but only the smiling face from the chin above. I am in raptures and beside myself with inexpressible joy.... That bliss and calmness of mind I then felt, how can words describe [it]? Tears of joy flowed down my cheeks. I went to the temple to have *darshan* of Lord Arunachala and I found the living Lord as he graciously revealed himself. I can never forget the deep intimate experience I had in the ancient temple.[3]

The vision I had of Sri Bhagavan in the temple strengthened my faith in him. The other vision I had in the hall assured me that the help of all spiritual Masters, including Sri Bhagavan, was available to me all the time. Having been blessed with these

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Many temples have these ceremonies, usually once every few decades, to purify the deity of any accidental past contamination and to empower it for the future. The Arunachaleswara Temple had one of these regular *kumbhabhishekams* after Bhagavan moved to Ramanasramam. Since this ceremony would have cancelled the ritual pollution engendered by Bhagavan's unauthorised embrace, Bhagavan himself commented that the story could now be included in any subsequent publications.

Kunju Swami's version of this story can be found in a 1980 article by Ra Ganapati in *Ramakrishna Vijayam*, a Tamil journal.

[3] *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, 1949 ed., p. 168.

visions, I now knew that I was on the right path, and I knew that my Master was guiding me in everything I did.

Darshan and Grace

Replying to a question of a visitor to Sri Ramanasramam a few years ago, Sri Ramana Maharshi said: 'To have *darshan* of a saint is sure to bring good to you. Thousands of people pass by Tiruvannamalai in trains every day, but few alight here and fewer still visit the ashram. About *darshan* of and association with a saint, the scriptures say that it is a vessel that enables you to cross the vast ocean of *samsara*. What more benefit do you want?'

I can heartily endorse this comment, citing the evidence of my own particular case. By merely having the *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan, the sun of spiritual wisdom appeared on the horizon of my life, driving away the darkness of disbelief and delusion. It illuminated my heart with the light of devotion. Since that blissful moment, the gracious gleam of light in my heart has been growing into a bigger and brighter flame.

How does *darshan* actually work? Vinoba Bhave, the great disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, explained the process in a speech he gave many years ago at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh:

'I own the fact that a person's external activities stop automatically when his heart is fully saturated with love and his sense of non-duality with all beings reaches its consummation. If we happen to meet such a person who has attained oneness with all, his mere *darshan* will drive away our miseries. But from among crores of people, we will find only one *mahatma* [great being] of this type.'

Sri Bhagavan was undoubtedly one of those rare *mahatmas* who had the power to banish suffering merely through his presence, merely through giving *darshan*. This giving of *darshan*, and the concomitant transmission of grace, formed the central and most important part of his teaching.

Having said that, one must be wary of attaching too much importance to the external physical form of the one who gives *darshan*, for has not Sri Bhagavan himself said, 'The Guru is within. Meditation is meant to remove the ignorant idea that he is only outside. If he be a stranger whom you await, he is

bound to disappear also. What is the use of a transient being like that?'

He further says that in order to receive the grace of the Guru 'One of two things must be done: either surrender yourself because you realise your inability and need a higher power to help you; or, investigate into the cause of misery by self-enquiry and so merge in the Self. Either way you will attain freedom from misery. God or Guru never forsakes the devotee who has surrendered himself.'

So, the Guru provides the *darshan* and the silent grace. The devotee, for his part, tries to enhance his ability to receive and experience that grace by enquiring 'Who am I?' or by surrendering to the source. Truly speaking, *darshan* and grace go together; one inevitably follows from the other. *Darshan* begets the experience of grace, and if it does not beget it, the *darshan* is not that of a true saint or sage.

A saint's *darshan* will always be fruitful; it can only bring good. But as Sri Vinobaji says, in the vast multitude of lakhs and crores, there will only be one true sage. Hence, when we find such a sage, we must avail ourselves of his *darshan* and grace to our fullest capacity.

Though the *darshan* and the grace are always beneficial, the devotee may not always be aware of the purifying effect they are having on him. This can be illustrated by an incident I witnessed in Sri Bhagavan's hall.

For most of the day Sri Bhagavan used to sit on his sofa, which was adjacent to a window. Squirrels would occasionally come in through the window and run around near him. Sri Bhagavan would often respond to them by lovingly feeding them cashews or other foodstuffs with his own hand.

One day Sri Bhagavan was feeding the squirrels when a Muslim devotee, who had been watching him, gave him a note in which was written: 'The squirrels are very fortunate because they are getting the food from your own hands. Your grace is so much on them. We feel jealous of the squirrels and feel that we also should have been born as squirrels. Then it would have been very good for us.'

Sri Bhagavan couldn't help laughing when he read this note.

He told the man, 'How do you know that the grace is not there on you also?'

And then, to illustrate his point, he started to tell a long story.

'One saint had the *siddhi* [supernatural power] of correct predictive speech. That is, whatever he said came true. In whatever town he went to, the local people would come to him to have his *darshan* and to get his blessings. The saint, who was also full of compassion, removed the unhappiness of the people by blessing them. Because his words always came true, the blessings always bore fruit. That is why he was so popular.

'During his wanderings he came to a town where, as usual, a lot of people flocked to him to get his blessings. Among the blessing seekers there was a thief. He went to have *darshan* of the saint in the evening and asked for his blessings. When the saint blessed him, the thief was very happy. He felt certain that, because of these blessings, when he went out to steal at night, he would be successful. But it turned out otherwise. Whenever he went to break into a house, somebody or other from that house would wake up and he would have to run away. He tried in three or four places but he could not succeed anywhere.

'Because of his failure, the thief got very angry with the saint.

'Early the next morning he went back to him and angrily said, "You are an impostor! You are giving false blessings to the people."

'The saint very peacefully asked the reason for his anger. In reply the thief narrated in detail how unsuccessful he had been during his attempts to steal the previous night.

'Having heard his story, the saint commented, "In that case, the blessings have borne fruit".

'"How?" the thief asked with astonishment.

'"Brother, first tell me: being a thief, is it a good or a bad job?"

'"It is bad," the thief admitted, but then he defended himself by saying, "But what about the stomach that I have to feed?"

'The saint continued with his explanation: "To be unsuccessful in bad work means that the blessings have indeed borne fruit. There are so many other ways of feeding the stomach. You should accept any one of them. To come to this conclusion it was necessary that you be unsuccessful in your thieving work."

'The thief understood and informed the saint that in future he would take up some other, honest work. He prostrated before the saint and left.'

Having narrated the above story, Sri Bhagavan asked the Muslim devotee, 'Do you mean to say that if everything goes

according to your desires, only then is it possible to say that the grace of a saint has worked?'

'I don't understand,' replied the Muslim devotee.

Sri Bhagavan explained in more detail: 'The blessings of a saint perform the purificatory work of life. These blessings cannot increase impurity. One whose understanding is limited will ask for blessings so that he can fulfil certain desires, but if the desires are such that their fulfilment will make the seeker more impure rather than purer, the saint's blessings will not enable him to fulfil the desires. In this way the seeker is saved from further impurities. In that case, are not the saint's blessings a gift of compassion?'

The Muslim devotee finally understood and was satisfied by these words.

Frugality, Faith and Non-Possession

As Sri Bhagavan's fame began to spread, the number of visitors to the ashram increased. Many of them tried to offer him presents such as fancy sheets for his sofa, curtains for the doors and windows, embroidered carpets, etc. In order to satisfy the devotees who offered these things, Sri Bhagavan would usually allow his attendant to substitute, for a short period of time, the new offerings for the ones that were already in use. After a few hours they would be removed and sent away to the ashram storeroom, and the old, still-serviceable items would be brought back into use. Sri Bhagavan would briefly utilise these presents merely to strengthen the devotion of the donors. Left to himself, he would use cheap or old items, and never claim that they were his own. Devotees who tried to get him to use newer or better-made products could always count on resistance from Sri Bhagavan himself. I discovered this for myself when I tried to give him a new pen.

Sri Bhagavan generally used two fountain pens: one contained blue ink, the other, red. Both of these pens were quite old and looked, to me at least, worn out. One day the top cover of the red-ink pen cracked, so a devotee took it to town to have it repaired. It was gone for several days. During this period Sri Bhagavan reverted to an old-fashioned nib pen that had to be dipped in an inkpot of red ink. Since this seemed to cause him some inconvenience, I decided to get him a new pen. I wrote to

a friend in Bombay and asked him to send one immediately. A few days later the pen arrived by post. I went straight to Sri Bhagavan and handed over the unopened parcel containing the pen.

Whenever a parcel or letter bore the name of the sender on the cover, Sri Bhagavan never failed to notice it. As soon as he received the packet from me, he turned it over and read the name of both the recipient and the sender. Having deduced that the parcel had been sent at my instigation, he took out the pen, carefully examined it, and put it back in the box. He then tried to hand the box to me.

Allowing it to remain in his hand, I explained, 'It has been ordered from Bombay specially for Sri Bhagavan's use'.

'By whom?' he asked.

'By me,' I said, not without some embarrassment because I was beginning to feel that Sri Bhagavan did not approve of my action.

'What for?' demanded Sri Bhagavan.

'Sri Bhagavan's red-ink pen was out of order,' I said, 'and I saw that it was inconvenient for him to write with a pen holder and nib.'

'But what is wrong with this old pen?' he asked, taking out the old red-ink pen that had by then been received back in good repair.

'What is wrong with it?' he repeated. He opened it up and wrote a few words to demonstrate that it had been restored to full working order.

'Who asked you to send for a new pen?' demanded Sri Bhagavan again. He was clearly annoyed that I had done this on his behalf.

'No one asked me,' I said, with faltering courage. 'I sent for it on my own authority.'

Sri Bhagavan waved the old pen at me. 'As you can see, the old pen has been repaired and writes very well. Where is the need for a new pen?'

Since I could not argue with him, I resorted to pleading and said, 'I admit that it was my mistake, but now that it has come, why not use it anyway?'

My plea was turned down and the new pen went the way of all its forerunners. It was sent to the office to be used there.

Sri Bhagavan gave us an example of how to live simply by

refusing to accumulate unnecessary things around him. He also refused to let anyone do any fund raising on behalf of the ashram. In this too he set an example. He taught us that if we maintain an inner silence and have faith in God's providence, everything we need will come to us automatically. He demonstrated the practicality of this approach by refusing to let anyone collect money for the construction of the temple over his mother's *samadhi*. Though large amounts of money were being spent on it every day, we had to rely on unsolicited donations to carry on the work. I knew this from direct experience because one day the ashram manager asked me to get permission from Sri Bhagavan to go to Ahmedabad to ask for a donation from a rich man I knew who lived there. Sri Bhagavan, as usual, flatly refused. No amount of persuasion could move him from his categorical 'No'.

'How is it,' he complained, 'that you people have no faith?'

He pointed to the hill and told us, 'This Arunachala gives us everything we want'.

In his early years on the hill Sri Bhagavan and his devotees lived on begged food. He had no objection to this form of begging. Indeed, as a teenager he had walked the streets of Tiruvannamalai, begging for his own food. What he objected to, when devotees went out to beg for their food, was asking for specific items. Devotees could only eat what was freely given.

In the period that Sri Bhagavan lived in Virupaksha Cave, visiting devotees would often leave food for the people who lived there. The resident devotees would beg for additional food if the donated amount was not enough. If the combined amount was insufficient to make a good meal for everyone, Sri Bhagavan would mix all the food together, add hot water and make a kind of porridge that would then be shared equally among all those present.

Devotees who found this home-made gruel unappetising would sometimes request that at least some salt should be added to the mixture.

'But where are we to get the salt?' Sri Bhagavan would ask. 'Who will give us salt unless we specifically ask for it? If once we relax our rule of non-begging in order to get salt, the palate that craves for salt today will next cry out for *sambar*, then for *rasam*, then for buttermilk and so on. Its cravings will thus grow

endlessly. Because of this we should stick to our rule of non-begging.'

It was certainly no joke to live with Sri Bhagavan in those early days. Sometimes the devotees had to do without salt, at other times without a substantial meal. There were even days when there was no food at all.

When Sri Bhagavan's mother came to stay with him, she insisted on starting a kitchen. Utensils were needed for it, but how to get them without asking or making the need known? Some things were acquired easily. When the word spread that a kitchen had been started, many of the necessary items of equipment arrived unasked from devotees who lived in town, but some useful utensils were not forthcoming.

Sri Bhagavan's mother solved the problem merely by bringing it to his attention. It was well known that if Sri Bhagavan suddenly became aware that some needed item was not available in the ashram, it would often appear, unasked, soon afterwards. This happened far too often for it to be a coincidence.

One day, for example, a ladle was required. Instead of asking for it from some devotee, his mother told Sri Bhagavan about it.

He merely replied 'We'll see,' but he didn't ask anyone to bring one.

How could he, who had taken to non-begging, ask even for a ladle? But within a couple of days a devotee, of his own accord, brought half a dozen ladles and placed them at his mother's feet. When other vessels or utensils were needed, she would inform Sri Bhagavan and he would give his usual reply: 'We'll see.' Within a short space of time the required item would arrive. So, without breaking or relaxing Sri Bhagavan's strict 'no specific begging' rule, the kitchen at Skandashram expanded and thrived.

This did not only happen with kitchen items. During his stay at Virupaksha Cave Sri Bhagavan often developed a severe cough. During one of these attacks he took *bala harade* [a small myrobalan or cherry plum] as a remedy, chewing it and swallowing its juice. This treatment lasted for a considerable amount of time, as a result of which the entire ashram stock of *bala harade* was consumed. When there were none left, the cough returned with more violence and vigour. Palaniswami, Sri Bhagavan's attendant, asked for permission to buy more *bala harade* from the town. Of course, the permission was not granted.

A few minutes later Sri Bhagavan casually remarked, '*Harade*

[big myrobalan] is better remedy than *bala harade* for coughing'.

Shortly afterwards a devotee entered the cave with a small bundle in his hand. He had come to pay homage to Sri Bhagavan.

Holding the bundle before him he said, 'As I was coming here from my village, I saw a man sitting on the roadside, selling big myrobalans. It struck me that it was good for coughing, so I brought some for Sri Bhagavan's use.'

He opened the bundle and placed it before Sri Bhagavan, who asked him with a smile on his face, 'But why did you buy so much?'

The devotee replied, 'It was quite cheap and the seller wouldn't agree to sell me a small amount. I had to buy all of them. Let them be here. Since I don't want any myself, let them stay here.'

The idea of buying and bringing *harade* to the ashram thus coincided with the utterance of Sri Bhagavan's words. Can this coincidence be attributed to anything else than the strict observance of the rule of non-begging by Sri Bhagavan?

At times, also to cure his cough, Sri Bhagavan used to chew black raisins. These also ran out while Sri Bhagavan was still having coughing attacks.

Palaniswami again requested Sri Bhagavan to allow him to buy more from the town, but his request was summarily turned down with the remark, 'Let's see, where's the hurry?'

A few minutes later Sri Gambiram Seshayya entered with a packet in his hand. 'What have you brought?' someone asked.

'Raisins,' was the reply.

'Then you must have known about our talk here,' said Sri Bhagavan with a laugh.

'O Bhagavan!' said Sri Seshayya, folding his hands in a *namaskar*, 'How could I know in advance what was being talked about here? It just occurred to me when I started out from my house that I should bring something to offer here. When I went to the market, only one shop was open. In that shop only a small quantity of black raisins was available. There was nothing else there that could be useful here. So, I had to buy these black raisins. The thought of buying them never occurred to me before I entered the shop.'[4]

[4] Bhagavan himself recounted many of the incidents in this section in *Letters From Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 54, dated 6th August, 1946.

If there is a moral in these stories it is that all things flow towards the person who adheres strictly to the resolve of non-begging. Or, one could say that if one abides as the Self with the conviction that there is a higher power that arranges for all the necessary things to be supplied, then one need not go looking for them because they will arrive unasked.

Equality

Once, more recently, when Sri Bhagavan was very debilitated, his doctors recommended that he should take some nourishing food. But he would not listen to them or to the devotees who appealed to him to follow the advice. Some of them were earnestly begging him to eat thickly buttered bread, others were trying to make him drink milk and orange juice. But to all of them he had only one answer to give.

With his usual genial smile he would say, 'But how can we afford to have such a luxurious diet? For us there can only be the poor man's rations.'

'But what is the harm in changing one's diet for the sake of one's health?' ventured one devotee in a plaintive tone. 'Even Mahatma Gandhi takes a special diet and Sri Aurobindo too does the same, to keep up their health. Please, therefore, take a tumblerful of orange juice, at least for our sake.'

'But do you know the cost of a tumbler of orange juice?' asked Sri Bhagavan.

'Oh, only four *annas*,' rejoined the devotee, with hope gleaming in his eyes.

'No, it won't be four *annas*. We will require about 200 tumblers of juice. Do you want me alone to gulp down the drink with all of you watching, empty-handed? Moreover, how can poor people like us provide for 200 tumblers of juice, paying Rs 50 every day?'

This answer checked the devotee's pleas for a while, but he would not give up so easily. He still had a lingering hope that if once Sri Bhagavan started to take the nourishing diet, he would continue to do so for at least enough days for his health to improve a little. So, the next day, he quietly prepared hot *rotis* [chapatis], well smeared with *ghee* [clarified butter], and filled two tumblers, one with milk and the other with orange juice.

Then with the assistance of a few other devotees, he took all these things to Sri Bhagavan on a tray.

'What's all this?' he enquired as he saw them walking towards him.

The devotees placed the tray before him, uncovered it and begged him to accept the offering. He refused point-blank even to touch the food, asking instead that the devotees should consume it. Repeated appeals to him from other devotees were also of no avail.

Then, in the heat of the moment, a woman devotee who was present at the time burst out, 'O Bhagavan! Just as you are kind enough to agree to sit on your sofa [instead of on the floor like everyone else] for our sake, why not also favour us by taking this special diet?'

Though the woman spoke these words in good faith, the outcome was quite the reverse of what was expected. Hardly had she finished when, to her and the other devotees' dismay, Sri Bhagavan got down from his sofa and squatted on the floor. The woman was horrified by the consequences of her suggestion.

She called out with anguish in her heart and tears in her eyes, 'Bhagavan! No! Please don't! What a stupid woman I am! What stupid words I blurted out!'

Then she got hysterical and started screaming.

All the others stood around, aghast at what had happened. The remedy had turned out to be worse than the disease. The *rotis*, the milk, the juice were abandoned as everybody racked their brains to find a way out of this impasse and reseat Sri Bhagavan on the sofa.

It was certain that no appeal or argument would move Sri Bhagavan to change his decision. Eventually a devotee who had been associated with Sri Bhagavan for over thirty-five years resolved to take a desperate step. Without any fuss, he simply started lifting Sri Bhagavan bodily. Seeing this, one or two other devotees joined him and together they succeeded in placing Sri Bhagavan's body back on the sofa. Sri Bhagavan did not resist, nor subsequently did he try to come down from the sofa. But the devotees had been so upset by the incident that even after seeing Sri Bhagavan sitting quietly on the sofa again, they began to beseech him not to get down again.[5]

[5] Bhagavan's sofa appeared in the 1920s. A devotee named

Sri Bhagavan accepted the new situation graciously. Though the status quo had apparently been restored by sheer physical force, it was really the love and devotion of the devotees that caused him to stay on the sofa, much to everyone's relief. Thus, a loving attempt by devotees to make Sri Bhagavan agree to take a special diet came to a fruitless end.

Though he would usually get annoyed if devotees tried to give him special treatment, or if he saw people needlessly inflicting suffering on others, Sri Bhagavan could never be provoked to anger by any amount of criticism or personal abuse. Two separate incidents illustrate this very well.

Once when Sri Bhagavan was sitting in his cave on Arunachala, a *sadhu* who was jealous of his increasing fame urinated on his back as a deliberate act of provocation. Sri Bhagavan remained as unperturbed and Self-absorbed as ever. Not a tinge of anger rose in him. The *sadhu* was baffled by his calm response. Realising that nothing could irritate Sri Bhagavan, the poor *sadhu* quietly went away.

On another occasion, many years later, a young man visited Sri Ramanasramam with an evil purpose. After entering the hall and taking his seat on the front row, he began to put all kinds of aggressive questions to Sri Bhagavan. We found out later that he wanted to extort hush money from the ashram by exposing Sri Bhagavan as a hypocrite and a fraud. He had already successfully tried his trick elsewhere, and by repeated practice he had cultivated this art into a paying profession. Having gained successes in other ashrams, he had come to Sri Ramanasramam to try his tricks there.

Sri Bhagavan's own method of meeting insolence, malice, jealousy and misbehaviour in general was the observance of complete silence. This powerful weapon baffled and disarmed all aggressive and insolent visitors.

When the youth tried to draw Sri Bhagavan into a controversial discussion so that he could catch him out when

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Rangaswami Gounder brought it and insisted that Bhagavan use it. Prior to that he had sat on a slightly raised platform in one corner of the hall. Rangaswami Gounder begged and pleaded for three days before he finally got Bhagavan to agree to use the sofa. For this remarkable achievement he was thereafter known as 'Sofa Gounder' to all the devotees.

he made a potentially embarrassing answer, Sri Bhagavan remained completely silent. The poor man could make no headway at all. He tried insults, he tried belching out foul language, but Sri Bhagavan did not utter a single word. He did not accept any of the insults or respond to them in any way. He merely remained calm, unperturbed and smiling. The young man, after exhausting all his insults, saw the impossibility of achieving his object. He had to admit defeat and quit the ashram.

Vibhuti

Some years ago a *sadhu* came to Tiruvannamalai. He used to give a pinch of *vibhuti* [sacred ashes] to all those who went to have his *darshan*. A rumour soon began to circulate that the *vibhuti* given out by this *sadhu* had miraculous powers. Large crowds flocked to the home of this ascetic, and many people began to call him 'Vibhuti Swami' – 'the saint of the holy ashes'.

Vibhuti Swami had set up his camp about a quarter of a mile from Sri Ramanasramam, occupying a *mantapam* on the Bangalore road. Because this *mantapam* was on the same road as Sri Ramanasramam, but farther away from town, the pilgrims who went from town to see Vibhuti Swami had to walk past Sri Ramanasramam. Many of these people would visit Sri Ramanasramam on their way back from Vibhuti Swami's *mantapam* to pay their respects to Sri Bhagavan. Consequently, the number of visitors to the ashram increased dramatically. Sri Bhagavan noticed the increased traffic through the hall, enquired about it and was duly informed of the cause of these unusual crowds.

Sri Bhagavan used to go for a walk twice a day, once at 9.45 a.m. after he had read the morning post, and once at 4.45 p.m. after he had gone through all the replies to the same letters. In his later years Sri Bhagavan's knee joints got very stiff, making it hard for him to go for his twice-daily walks. If he didn't massage them regularly with oil, the joints refused to work to such an extent that he could not even get down from his sofa. One day he forgot to massage one of his knees and only discovered it when he tried, unsuccessfully, to get off his sofa.

Seeing that my eyes were fixed on the stiff knee joints, he remarked, 'This body requires oiling, just like a machine. This joint did not work because it was not oiled.'

After speaking these words he began to massage the joint with oil to get it working again. Just then a group of visitors on their way back from Vibhuti Swami entered the hall to pay their respects to Sri Bhagavan.

On seeing them Sri Bhagavan said humorously to one of us, 'What must they be thinking about this swami [meaning himself]? Perhaps they say to themselves, "How can this swami heal others when he cannot even heal himself?"'

Sri Bhagavan was so humble he could make a joke about his own inability to effect physical cures either on himself or on other people. Even when miraculous cures did happen on account of a devotee's faith in him, he never accepted responsibility for the miracle. For him, all these things went on automatically and were part of the natural activity of the Self.

Faith in Sri Bhagavan has produced many a miraculous cure. Since we are on the subject of *vibhuti* and miracles, I can illustrate this very well by retelling a story that was told to me by an old devotee who had known Sri Bhagavan from his earliest days on the hill.

In 1908 Sri Bhagavan was staying in Pachaiamman Temple on the north-eastern side of the mountain. There were many tamarind trees nearby. The municipality gave the highest bidder the contract to collect tamarind from these trees every year.[6] That particular year a Muslim had got the contract. Since these trees gave an unusually rich yield, the contractor himself used to protect them from the monkeys, driving them away by shooting stones at them from a catapult. Because he only wanted to scare them away, he took care to see that they were not injured. However, by some ill chance, a stone from his catapult hit a monkey on its head so hard, it died on the spot. Immediately, a large number of monkeys surrounded the corpse and began to wail and lament the death of their relative. Then,

[6] In India it is widely believed that it is inauspicious to have a tamarind tree on one's property. However, there is a huge demand for the fruit of this tree because it is a major ingredient in Indian cooking. In colonial times the government resolved this problem in an elegant way. Tamarind trees were planted on government land by the sides of major roads, providing shade to travellers and fruit for the market. Each year the government would accept tenders for harvesting specified sections of the highways, and the highest bidder would get the contract. The money raised in this way would be used to maintain the roads.

by way of a complaint, they took the dead body to Sri Bhagavan in the Pachaiamman Temple.

These monkeys considered Sri Bhagavan as a friend and arbiter. He frequently settled their internal disputes and even acted as an honest broker when rival tribes were having territorial disputes. He could communicate with them quite easily and he did his best to establish peace and harmony among the warring tribes and their fractious members. So, at this time of anger and grief, it was quite natural for the monkeys to bring both the corpse and their complaints to Sri Bhagavan.

As soon as they came near him they burst into angry cries and tears. Sri Bhagavan, whose heart registered and mirrored the emotions of those around him, responded to their anguish with tears of his own. Gradually, though, his emanations of sympathetic love soothed and calmed the turmoil within the monkeys' hearts.

Then, by way of consolation, Sri Bhagavan told them, 'Death is inevitable for everyone who is born. He at whose hands this monkey died will also meet with death one day. There is no need to grieve.'

Sri Bhagavan's words and his loving kindness pacified the monkeys. They went away, carrying the corpse with them.

Two or three days later the Muslim contractor became bedridden with some serious malady. The story of the '*upadesa*' given by Sri Bhagavan to the aggrieved monkeys spread from mouth to mouth till it reached the home of the Muslim contractor. The members of his family became convinced that his sudden illness was due to the saint's curse. They therefore went to Pachaiamman Temple and began to plead for Sri Bhagavan's pardon for the ailing contractor.

'It is certain that your curse has affected him,' they began. 'Please save him from death. Give us some *vibhuti*. If we apply it to his body, he will surely recover.'

With a benign smile Sri Bhagavan replied, 'You are mistaken. I never curse or bless anyone. I sent away the monkeys that came here by telling them the simple truth that death inevitably occurs to all those who are born. Moreover, I never give *vibhuti* to anyone. So please go home and nurse the patient whom you have left all alone.'

The Muslims did not believe his explanation. They announced that they were not going away unless they received some *vibhuti*

to cure their relative with. So, just to get rid of them, Sri Bhagavan gave them a pinch of wood ash from the outside of his cooking fire. On receiving it, their faces beamed with joy. They expressed their hearty gratitude to the sage and returned home.

The family of the contractor had great faith in this '*vibhuti*'. Soon after it was applied to the ailing man, he began to recover. Within a few days he rose from his bed, fully recovered.

What a world of difference there was between the *vibhuti* given by Vibhuti Swami and that given by Sri Ramana Swami! And what sublime humility went with Sri Bhagavan's offering of *vibhuti*!

Jagadisha Sastri

Jagadisha Sastri was a distinguished Sanskrit scholar whose association with Sri Bhagavan went back to the days when the latter lived in Virupaksha Cave. He told me the following two stories, neither of which has been recorded before, when I met him years later in Bombay.

In the early years of this century Jagadisha Sastri went to see Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave to listen to him giving a spiritual talk. Everyone was so engrossed in listening, no one was aware of the passage of time. As the talk did not end till well after midnight, Jagadisha Sastri decided to sleep in front of the cave instead of returning to town. This was a brave act because in those days there were still wild animals on the hill.

Around 2 a.m. Sri Bhagavan began to feel concerned about his safety. He went out of the cave and put a pinch of snuff up the nose of Jagadisha Sastri, who was snoring in deep sleep. He woke up in an extremely startled state and began to sneeze repeatedly. Sri Bhagavan began to laugh because he found the repeated sneezes very amusing. Jagadisha said that he laughed so hard, the mountain was reverberating with the noise.

When he had managed to stop laughing, he told Jagadisha Sastri, very affectionately, 'You were sleeping so soundly. Don't you know that this is not a house but a hill? It is the home of wild animals and here their kingdom prevails. Suppose some tiger were to come here? What would happen to you? Go and sleep inside the cave.'

Jagadisha told me that he was so sleepy that he stumbled

inside the cave and immediately fell asleep again. On hearing this story it did not surprise me that Sri Bhagavan had shown such concern towards one of his devotees. However, though I knew that he laughed and joked a lot and enjoyed playing games with devotees' children, I was astonished that his humour had erupted in such a mischievous and child-like way in the middle of the night.

Many years later, when Jagadisha Sastri and I were walking down a street together in Bombay, it occurred to me that I had never seen him wear any kind of footwear. The black tar roads of the city get very hot in summer and I found it hard to believe that anyone could walk comfortably on them without wearing sandals or shoes.

I turned to him and asked, 'Sastriji, your feet must have got burned a lot walking on these roads? Isn't that so?'

'No, no,' he answered, 'I have already got *ravi raksha* [protection from the sun] from Bhagavan. I may walk in any amount of heat but nothing ever happens to me.'

I naturally asked, 'How did you get this *ravi raksha*?'

By way of an answer Sastriji told me a long story.

'One day, right in the middle of the afternoon, Bhagavan took his *kamandalu* [water pot], got up and told me, "Jagadish, come with me to walk about on the mountain".

'"But it's so hot," I protested. "How can we move about in such weather?" I argued like this because I wanted to escape from the trip.

'Bhagavan found my excuse unsatisfactory. "You can move about in just the same way that I move about," he said.

'"But my feet will burn!" I exclaimed. I didn't have any footwear with me and I didn't relish the idea of walking about over the burning rocks.

'"Will my feet not burn as well?" replied Bhagavan, obviously feeling that this was not a serious obstacle. Bhagavan never wore any kind of footwear. He could walk on the toughest terrain in any weather without feeling the least discomfort.

'"But yours is a different case," I answered, alluding to the fact that Bhagavan never needed footwear.

'"Why? Am I not a man with two feet, just like you?" asked Bhagavan. "Why are you unnecessarily scared? Come on! Get up!"

'Having realised that it was useless to argue any more, I got

up and started walking with Bhagavan. The exposed stones had become so hot because of the severe heat of the sun, walking on them made my feet burn.

'For some time I bore the suffering, but when it became unbearable I cried out, "Bhagavan, my feet are burning so much! I cannot walk one more step. Even standing here is difficult. On all sides it is raining fire!"

'Bhagavan was not impressed. "Why are you so scared?" he asked.

'"If I remain in this terrible heat for any more time," I replied, "my head will crack open because of the heat and I will definitely die!" I was not joking. I really was afraid of dying.

'Bhagavan smiled and said in a very quiet and deep voice: "Jagadish, give up your fear and listen. You must have the *bhavana* [mental conviction and attitude] that you are the sun. Start doing *japa* of the mantra *suryosmi* [I am the sun] with the conviction that it is really true. You will soon see the effect of it. You yourself will become *surya swarupa*, that is, you will have the characteristics of the sun. Can the sun feel the heat of the sun?"

'I followed this instruction of Bhagavan and started doing *japa* of this sun mantra because there was no other way to be saved from the burning heat. In a short time I started to feel the effect of the *japa*. The severity of the heat began to lessen and eventually I began to experience, instead of severe heat, a pleasing coolness. As the feeling of burning diminished I found that I was able to walk quickly alongside Bhagavan. By the time we had both reached Skandashram I found that my feet were not at all burnt as I had continued the mantra *japa* right up till the end of the walk.

'Later, I was astonished to discover that the effect of chanting this mantra was permanent. Though I no longer chant it, I have never again suffered from the heat of the sun. I can now walk in summer on the tar roads of a city like Bombay with bare feet.'

The One with No Name

One day an old lady came into the hall at Sri Ramanasramam. After prostrating to Sri Bhagavan she placed a slip of paper in his hands. I guessed that it contained a prayer or doubt of some kind because it was the custom of many devotees to offer their

prayers or place their doubts before Sri Bhagavan in this manner. However, in this particular case, it turned out to be quite a different matter.

This old woman lived in town in a dilapidated temple and she needed money to repair it. With this purpose in mind she had got someone to prepare a draft of an appeal for funds. In order to collect the required amount more easily, she had hit upon the idea of having the appeal signed by eminent persons of the town. She had come to the ashram because she wanted Sri Bhagavan's signature at the head of the appeal. This was the piece of paper that she had presented to him. Sri Bhagavan read it and then returned it to her without uttering a single word.

'My work will be done if you will only put your signature on this appeal,' the old lady said, urging him to sign.

Sri Bhagavan replied by saying, 'It is well known that I never sign anything'.

She would not accept his refusal. Repeatedly she pressed him to sign, but she could not make him change his decision.

Finally Sri Bhagavan told her, 'Yes, yes, you want me to sign your appeal, but how can one who has no name sign? What name will one sign?'

The old woman was puzzled. What did Sri Bhagavan mean by saying that he had no name? Was not his name 'Sri Ramana Maharshi'? Since everyone knew him by that name, why could he not write these three words on her paper?

Because she could not understand the significance of Sri Bhagavan's reply, she persisted in pleading with him to sign. Sri Bhagavan remained unmoved and kept silent. After some time the old woman gave up her attempts and left the hall without, of course, having obtained Sri Bhagavan's signature.

Autograph hunters would often come to the ashram and request Sri Bhagavan to sign something in their autograph books. Sri Bhagavan would give all of them the same answer:

'Let him who has a name sign. Here [meaning himself] there is no name. How then can there be a signature?'

Let us try to understand the significance of Sri Bhagavan's assertion on this point. It is known that he attained the divine state of namelessness in Madurai itself, at the age of sixteen, for the note that he left for his family did not bear any signature whatsoever. It read:

> I have in search of my father, according to his command, started from this place. On a virtuous enterprise has this embarked. Therefore, for this act, none need grieve; nor to trace this out need money be spent. Your college fees are not yet paid. Rs 2 are herewith enclosed.
>
> Thus _____

Instead of a signature there was merely a horizontal line.[7] There was no one left who could be given a name.

At the time when this farewell note was written he was known as Venkataraman, but when he settled at the lotus feet of Sri Arunachala this name dropped off because he never told anyone what his original family name was. For some time, therefore, he bore no name at all. Gradually, as people came into contact with him, he became known by different names at different times: Bala Sannyasin, Bala Yogi, Kumara Swami, Kumara Tapasvi, Gurumurtam Swami, Brahmana Swami. In this manner, during the period from 1896 to 1907, many names were given to him. But so far as he was concerned, he did not accept any single one of them.

In 1907 the famous yogi Ganapati Muni came to offer his

[7] Commenting on Bhagavan's refusal to sign his farewell note, B. V. Narasimha Swami wrote (*Self-Realization*, 1985, p. 31):

'A signature would have been appended by [the] Venkataraman of earlier years. But on this occasion, the personality that began [the letter] with an "I" had melted into "this" in the succeeding lines, and at the close there was evidently no person remaining at that time and at that place to sign the letter. The sense of personality had sunk, vanished, or at any rate got too much attenuated to warrant a signature or produce an inclination to sign a letter.'

In November 1936 (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 281) Bhagavan was asked, 'Why do you not sign your name?' He replied:

'The author of *Self-Realization* has furnished his answer for this question. Moreover, by what name am I to be known? I myself do not know.'

Oddly enough, he had no objection to writing his name when he was correcting proofs or filling in omissions from printed texts that he saw. These, however, could not be counted as signatures. The signing of a signature indicates that one associates oneself with a particular name. This Bhagavan never did.

obeisance at Sri Bhagavan's feet. After Ganapati Muni had been impressed by Sri Bhagavan and his *upadesa*, he made enquiries and found out that his original name had been Venkataraman. Ganapati Muni decided to rename him 'Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi', the 'Ramana' component being a diminutive form of Venkataraman. This name was eventually accepted by all the other devotees. But even this was not accepted by Sri Bhagavan. For him, the Self was nameless and formless. He did not care if people assigned any number of names to him. He himself would not accept any single one of them.

Silence

Sri Bhagavan's language was that of silence. The 'speech' delivered through this medium was full of miraculous potency, as the following anecdote reveals.

When he was staying in Virupaksha Cave, a District Collector and a Deputy Collector came there for his *darshan*. After prostrating to Sri Bhagavan, the Collector began to speak, narrating at length all the *sadhanas* he had done and all the spiritual literature he had read. At the end of his speech he confessed that in spite of all these activities peace was as far from him as it had ever been.

As soon as he had finished, the Deputy Collector began to tell his own story. It was equally long. These two speeches took quite a long time to deliver, but Sri Bhagavan did not interrupt them even once.

He continued to remain in silence even after the speeches had ended. The Collector gave up waiting for a reply and delivered yet another long speech. Sri Bhagavan listened in silence and continued to remain in silence when the speech was over.

The Collector, not unnaturally, was a little put out by Sri Bhagavan's unresponsiveness.

He said, in an aggrieved tone of voice, 'We have been speaking to you for a long time, but you don't open your mouth at all. Please tell us something. Anything, however brief, will do.'

Sri Bhagavan finally spoke to them, saying, 'All this time I have been speaking in my own language. What can I do if you won't listen to it?'

The Collector was an intelligent man, well versed in spiritual

matters. He caught the meaning of Sri Bhagavan's cryptic reply. Suddenly overpowered by devotion, he fell down at the feet of Sri Bhagavan and chanted a Sanskrit verse from Sankaracharya's *Sri Dakshinamurti Stotra*:

> Look at the wonder under the banyan tree! While the disciples are old and grey-haired, the teacher is a blooming youth. And though the Master's speech is simple silence, the doubts of the disciples are all resolved![8]

Both of the visitors then abandoned their speeches and questions, preferring instead to sit before Sri Bhagavan in silent meditation. They got the peace they had come looking for and departed fully satisfied.

The greatness of silence as a medium of instruction can be shown by a dialogue on this subject that took place between Sri Bhagavan and a devotee. Though it took place on a different occasion, it can serve as a commentary on the encounter between Sri Bhagavan and the two officials.

Question: What is the fruit obtained by *mauna* [silence]?

Bhagavan: *Antara mauna* [inner silence] is self-surrender only, that means living without the ego sense.

Q: What is the meaning of *mauna*?

B: The state that is beyond speech and thought is called *mauna*. This is *dhyana* [meditation] without mental activity. *Dhyana* means controlling the mind; deep *dhyana* means permanent speech.

Silence is eternal speech; that is, the perpetual flow of

[8] Siva manifested as Dakshinamurti in order to instruct and enlighten four ascetics. In the traditional version of his story he appeared in the form of a young boy sitting under a banyan tree. The four ascetics attained enlightenment as a result of receiving Dakshinamurti's silent transmission. No words were ever exchanged between the Guru and these disciples. Dakshinamurti means 'southward-facing god' and his image appears on the outside of the southern wall of all South Indian Siva temples. Many devotees felt that Bhagavan was a modern manifestation of Dakshinamurti: he took up residence on the southern side of Arunachala, he identified himself with Arunachala-Siva, and he always preferred to teach and transmit his grace through silence.

language. By speaking, this flow is broken because the words create an obstacle to that silent language.

People may listen to discourses for hours, and may feel happy doing so, but still not improve. But silence, the eternal speech, enhances the welfare of all humanity. *Mauna* only means 'proficiency in speech'. Oral discourses do not have the proficiency of silence. Silence is the eternal, unobstructed flow of speech. That is the supreme language.[9]

[9] This is a paraphrase of statements that Bhagavan made on several occasions. See for example the following quotes, all taken from *Be As You Are*, 1992 ed., pp. 102-4:

'Silence is ever-speaking. It is a perennial flow of language which is interrupted by speaking. These words I am speaking obstruct that mute language. For example, there is electricity flowing in a wire. With resistance to its passage, it glows as a lamp or revolves as a fan. In the wire it remains as electric energy. Similarly also, silence is the eternal flow of language, obstructed by words.

'What one fails to know by conversation extending to several years can be known instantly in silence, or in front of silence – Dakshinamurti and his four disciples are a good example of this. This is the highest and most effective language...

'A realised one sends out waves of spiritual influence which draw many people towards him. Yet he may sit in a cave and maintain complete silence. We may listen to lectures upon truth and come away with hardly any grasp of the subject, but to come into contact with a realised one, though he speaks nothing, will give much more grasp of the subject. He never needs to go out among the public. If necessary he can use others as instruments...

'The Guru is the bestower of silence who reveals the light of Self-knowledge which shines as the residual reality. Spoken words are of no use whatsoever if the eyes of the Guru meet the eyes of the disciple.'

Lakshmana Swamy

In the first chapter of The Power Of The Presence, Part One, *Bhagavan tells Rangan that he has too many doubts and that he is asking too many questions.*

Bhagavan then remarked, 'Some people come here, sit before me and silently grasp the sole thing to be known. Then, without saying anything, they go away.'

Lakshmana Swamy belongs in this rare category. When he realised the Self in Bhagavan's presence, he had been with Bhagavan, on two separate visits, for less than four days. He had asked no questions and had not even spoken to Bhagavan. After his experience he went back to his ashram room, without speaking to anyone about what had happened.

Many people have reported dramatic experiences when Bhagavan looked at them, spoke to them, or merely smiled at them. When Lakshmana Swamy's climactic experience occurred, he was not even in the same room as Bhagavan. He was sitting outside the door of the new hall, looking in through the open doorway.

When I asked Lakshmana Swamy how he had managed to earn Bhagavan's grace so quickly and so fully, he smiled and replied, 'I finished all my work in previous lives. I was ready.'

Bhagavan sometimes spoke of a three-fold division of spiritual seekers. Some are like gunpowder, which will ignite with a single spark. Some are like charcoal, which needs a little heating before it will catch fire. The remainder are like wet wood, which needs a long period of drying out before it is ready to be ignited. When Lakshmana Swamy arrived at Ramanasramam in the latter half of 1949, he was fully ready for the divine spark.

I was brought up in my paternal grandfather's house in Gudur, Andhra Pradesh. My father, Bangaraiah, died when I was less than two years old and I have no memories of him at all. He had been a minor landowner in the area but the income from his land was not sufficient to support us. After he died my mother had to take an unskilled job in a local mica factory to supplement our income.

I attended the local primary school and later on the District Board High School, but in neither place did I have any interest in the subjects that were being taught. I never did much studying and I only managed to pass the annual exams because I had a useful ability to memorise texts after reading them through once or twice. My marks usually put me about half way down the class, but even this modest accomplishment seemed to surprise my classmates because none of them ever saw me do any work. The only part of the syllabus that I had any interest in or aptitude for was drawing. I found that I could sketch realistic portraits without training or practice, and art was the only subject in which I ever topped the class. Outside the classroom I was an enthusiastic participant in various team games such as hockey and football, but when the games were over I never did much socialising with the other boys because I preferred to sit quietly by myself. Though I wasn't as gregarious as the other boys, I seemed to be reasonably popular because I had a keen sense of humour and an innate ability to make other people laugh.

I had no interest in traditional religious practices when I was young. My mother would sometimes take me to the local temples, but even at a very young age I knew intuitively that performing rituals in front of stone statues was pointless.

When I was very young I remember asking my mother, 'How can this stone be God? God sometimes talks to devotees. How can a stone speak?'

Mother replied, 'God only talks to the priests when a curtain is drawn in front of the image'.

My next question was, 'How does a stone manage to eat all the food offerings that are given to it?'

I received a variation on the same answer: 'The priests feed the offerings to the god when the curtain is drawn.'

Even though I was very young, I could not believe that such things were possible, so I grew up with little or no interest in religious practices.

In my seventeenth year, while I was still at school, an inexplicable incident occurred that changed my life. I was sleeping in my family's house when an unknown malevolent force appeared to descend on me. I awoke with a tremendous pressure bearing down on my chest and my immediate reaction was that some unknown evil force was trying to kill me. Immediately and spontaneously the Rama mantra, 'Rama,

Rama', erupted from within me with a great roaring sound. I did not decide to say it, it just naturally burst out of me with great force. The evil presence, which could not compete with its power, vanished immediately. I had never repeated this mantra before, nor had it ever occurred to me that this mantra had any power. Prior to this remarkable incident I had been utterly sceptical about all matters pertaining to religion, but my lack of belief could not withstand this direct, first-hand experience. Concluding that there must be some power in the mantra, I began to repeat it on a regular basis. At the same time I also started doing *pranayama*, yogic breathing exercises.

I had to accept that the spontaneous eruption of this Rama mantra had somehow saved me, but my mind could not understand how it had happened. I felt I needed some kind of explanation as to why this mantra had been so successful in countering the evil force. I thought of all the people I knew, hoping that my mind would come up with someone who could give me a satisfactory explanation, but there was no one in my circle of friends or relatives whose judgement I really trusted. In the end I decided to keep quiet about it. Though it was a remarkable event that saved me from death, I discussed it with no one.

Soon after this strange incident my lifestyle began to change. I started getting up at 3 a.m. every morning in order to go for a long walk along the railway tracks. My destination was a bridge that spanned the local river. While it was still dark I would jump or even dive into this river and have an early morning swim. I had never swum before and my lack of experience almost resulted in my death. One morning I got sucked into a whirlpool, but had enough presence of mind not to fight it. Instead, I allowed myself to be sucked into it. It spun me down to the bottom of the river, then pushed me out sideways, and I surfaced in a stretch of calm water. On a subsequent day I got my foot caught in a hole in the railway track and only managed to extract it a few minutes before a train passed by. This was and still is a very busy line[1] and on one of my morning walks I found the mangled corpse of someone who had been less lucky than I in

[1] Gudur Junction is the station where the trains from Delhi and Calcutta meet on their way to Madras. Though Gudur is a small town, it has a vast amount of railway traffic.

avoiding an oncoming train. I left the body where it was because I didn't want to be blamed for the accident.

I was not taking these dangerous early morning walks simply because I felt a need for exercise. When I emerged from my morning swim, I would sit in meditation, practising *pranayama* and doing *japa* of the name of Rama. Occasionally, for variation, I would do *pranayama* while I was still submerged in the water. This daily programme lasted about two hours. At around 5 a.m. I would walk back to my house. I was once bitten by a poisonous snake as I was walking down the track and had to hack away the poisoned flesh with a sharp stone, but nothing ever deterred me from going there every day. This compulsion to rise at 3 a.m. to swim and meditate lasted for several years.[2]

The meditation and the *pranayama* brought about a certain amount of mental peace but they didn't bring any answers to some of the philosophical problems that were beginning to engage my mind. I was beginning to ask myself questions about the nature of the world and my relationship to it, and I became acutely aware that I was not in a position to resolve these problems by myself. This inability to find satisfactory solutions generated a sense of frustration in me. With no one to guide me, and having no ability to work things out for myself, I decided that my problems could only be solved if I had a vision of God. When that vision failed to appear, my frustration increased.

I did not want to give in to the sense of futility that was creeping up on me so, to counter it, I began to increase the amount of meditation I was doing. In addition to my early morning activities, if I had any free time during the day, I would sit under a tree in a local park and do *japa* of the name of Rama. I had not told any of my friends about my early morning meditations or my increasing interest in God. I wanted to keep it to myself. When they asked me why I was spending so much time sitting under that particular tree, I told them that it was a health-giving tree, and that when sunlight passed through the leaves, it became enriched with vitamins.

[2] I once asked Lakshmana Swamy why he had taken so much trouble and put up with so much danger and inconvenience in order to swim and meditate in the dark. He laughed and said that it was a habit left over from his previous life. He discovered later in his life that he had been a yogi in his previous incarnation, and this yogi had had similar habits.

While my friends may not have noticed much difference in my behaviour, apart from this peculiar habit of sitting under this tree, my family certainly did. They greeted my new lifestyle with mixed feelings.[3] Though a certain amount of devotion is acceptable in most Hindu households, the alarm bells go off when boys start to show too much interest in the religious life. Very few parents want their son to grow up to be a *sadhu*. When it looked to my relatives as if I might be heading that way, they tried to arrange an early marriage for me. A girl who came from the family that my elder brother had married into was selected for me. Both families were keen to go ahead with the marriage, but I refused to listen to any of their arguments. I insisted, point blank, that I had no intention of marrying anyone. In the end they had to accept my decision.

I passed my final school exams a few months later, much to the amazement of my friends, and I decided to continue my studies at the V. R. College in Nellore, which is about twenty-four miles north of my home town. My chosen subjects were botany, physics and chemistry, but in the years I was there I paid little attention to the subjects I was supposed to be studying. I preferred instead to read spiritual books such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and works on *advaita* Vedanta. I still retained the habit of getting up at 3 a.m. and going for a swim. The River Pennar ran through Nellore, and I found it to be an ideal place for swimming, even though it had a dangerous current. One boy, who looked to be about nineteen, drowned while I was there. I tried to save him, but I couldn't reach him in time. Though I was by then a good swimmer and never in any danger myself, the drowning of this boy, just before I reached him, made a deep impression

[3] Many years later Lakshmana Swamy's brother wrote these comments about this period of his life:

'Dispassion began to assert itself and take a firm root in him. His yearning for God strengthened his dispassion to the ephemeral objects and pleasures of the world... He often blamed his *prarabdha* [destiny] which had thrown him into the quagmire of this world which is full of persons swayed by desires and sensuous enjoyments. He was at a loss to know why people run after the illusory pleasures of this transitory world.' Taken from *Yogeeswara Sri Lakshmana, a Biography*, pp. 4-5.

This mellow view came from hindsight. At the time, the brother was just as disturbed by Lakshmana Swamy's behaviour as the rest of his family.

on me. The incident made me acutely aware that death is inevitable for all human beings, and that it may occur at any moment. I understood that nothing in this world is permanent, including life itself. I resolved that I would live without any attachments and I further resolved that I would transcend the human condition completely by realising the Self.

In the summer vacation of my first year at college I returned to Gudur and had my first major spiritual experience there. The big artificial lake that borders the town had dried up completely. I found the dry lakebed to be a good place to go to to perform my *pranayama* exercises. Usually, I went to a small hillock that in winter was a small island in the lake.

I was sitting there one evening in the *padmasana* [full lotus] position just as darkness was beginning to fall. As I began my usual *pranayama* exercises, the mind suddenly became concentrated, focussed and utterly still. There was a flash of light within me. It persisted and I became aware of an inner divine light, shining in all its magnificence. The light encircled and engulfed me and within a few seconds I lost all consciousness of the body. There was total inner stillness. *Paramatman*, the Supreme Self, shone within me in its fullest glory and splendour. The effulgence of *Atman* within me impressed on me the fact that *Atman* is God Himself in this temple of the physical body. My joy knew no bounds because I realised that *Atman* had become my Guru.

The experience was a brief one but it gave me a glimpse and a foretaste of the goal I was aiming at. I tried on many occasions to repeat this experience but it never returned. I reluctantly came to the conclusion that I would never be able to establish myself in a state of permanent Self-awareness through my own efforts. I realised that a Guru in human form was necessary, and that the formless *Atman* could not, by itself, bring about my realisation.

Though I reached this conclusion I had no idea where I could find such a competent Guru. The desire to meet one was there, but I could do nothing about it. Lacking any clear alternative, I went back to college to begin my second year and soon fell back into the usual routine of swimming, meditation and half-hearted studying. The only difference was that I dropped the practice of *pranayama*. I had begun these daily exercises four years earlier. No one had taught me how to do them. I had picked up the

techniques myself by reading *Raja Yoga*, a book by Swami Vivekananda. I had started to do these exercises in order to control my mind and keep it free from unwanted thoughts. At the end of these four years I decided that my mind was sufficiently quiet for me to dispense completely with this aid. For the next three years my *sadhana* consisted exclusively of *japa* of the name of Rama.

On the last day of my second year at college my attention was drawn to a large crowd that had congregated in and around the main lecture hall. I was not able to enter the hall itself because it was crowded with students, but looking over the heads of the people at the back of the hall I could see that the lecture was being given by my English professor, G. V. Subbaramayya. I was at a great distance from the platform so I could not hear clearly the words of the lecturer, but when he pointed to a portrait that was standing next to him on the platform and said that the sage in the portrait was Sri Ramana Maharshi, the words rang in my ears. Up till that moment I had never heard of the Maharshi. However, as soon as I heard the name, I felt an irrepressible longing to see him. Since no details of his location were given, I was not then aware of how I could go about finding him and seeing him. I should have asked Professor Subbaramayya, but I missed my chance, and since this was the last day of the academic year, I returned home to Gudur with no useful information about the Maharshi and his whereabouts.

I didn't have to wait long to discover the information that I desired. As I was returning to Gudur by train the following day I saw a small booklet entitled *Sri Ramana Maharshi* on sale at the bookstore on the station platform. I eagerly purchased it, opened it at the first page and read the following verse that had been composed in Sanskrit by Ramana Maharshi himself:

> In the interior of the Heart-cave the one Supreme Being, *Brahman*, shines as 'I-I', verily the *Atman*. Entering into the Heart with a one-pointed mind either through self-enquiry or by diving within or by breath control, abide thou in *Atmanishta* [the state of being firmly established in the Self].

I had already learned enough Sanskrit to understand the meaning. This one verse made a deep and immediate impression

on me. There was no question of memorising it. As soon as I read it, all the lines were immediately imprinted on my heart.

I learned from this small booklet that Ramana Maharshi lived in an ashram just outside Tiruvannamalai. I located this town on a map, but at this time in my life I wasn't in a position to make a pilgrimage there.

My laziness at college finally caught up with me and I twice failed my second year exams. I went back to staying with my family in Gudur, but life there was far from congenial. I was under renewed pressure to get married and spent a lot of time arguing with my family over this issue. I stood firm and again refused to consider marriage. To avoid the quarrels at home I spent most of my time in solitary places where no one could find me or speak to me. Most of my time was spent in meditation. There was no necessity of finding a job because I had a small private income that had come from inheriting a share in my grandfather's house. My portion of the house was rented out and I gave the income to my family.

A year went by in which I did little except meditate. Towards the end of 1948 my mother insisted that I must make a larger contribution to the family's budget. A job was found for me in a local mica company where I worked as a clerk-typist for about five months. I had no interest whatsoever in the work. I did it only because my family insisted that they needed more money. At the beginning of 1949 I resigned my position and persuaded my mother to accompany me on a trip to Sri Ramanasramam. One of my aunts had already been to see Bhagavan and she reported to me that he was an old man who wouldn't live much longer. She described him as 'a ripe fruit about to drop off the tree'. This report spurred me into action, making me realise that I didn't have much time if I wanted to see Bhagavan.

My pilgrimage to Ramanasramam began at the local train station in Gudur. While I was waiting for the train to arrive, my mother started talking to two women who were also waiting for the same train. It was soon discovered that they too were heading for Ramanasramam. They were accompanying Sathyananda Swami, a long-time devotee of Ramana Maharshi. When this swami was informed that we were on our way to Tiruvannamalai and that we were planning to visit Ramanasramam for the first time, he invited us to join his party. I was delighted by this fortuitous turn of events. I felt that

Bhagavan himself had sent one of his devotees to guide us to his ashram.

The journey took all day and it was well after dark when we finally arrived in Tiruvannamalai. We spent the night at a choultry and the following morning we walked to Ramanasramam in the company of Swami Sathyananda. Instead of approaching the ashram by the main road, we ended up arriving through the back gate, located between the kitchen and the storeroom. As we were climbing the steps that led up to the gate, we saw Bhagavan walking slowly in the direction of the cow shed. Bhagavan noticed us, stopped for a few seconds to look at us, and then carried on with his walk. Entering through the back gate had thus proved to be very fortuitous because it enabled us to have a brief and almost private *darshan* of Bhagavan at a time when the ashram was immensely crowded.

I soon discovered that we had arrived at an inconvenient time. The ashram was overflowing with visitors who had come from all parts of the country to attend the consecration and opening ceremony of the temple that had been constructed over the *samadhi* of Bhagavan's mother. The main consecration ceremony was due to take place a few days after our arrival.

Because we had arrived with a devotee who was well known to the ashram management, there was no problem in getting accommodation, but speaking to Bhagavan proved to be more difficult. I wanted to speak to him about the experience of the Self I had had in the dried-up lake in Gudur, but I never got a chance because there were always large crowds of people milling around him. I had to be content with having *darshan* in a large crowd of other devotees.

On one of the days of my visit I was standing by the main ashram well. Bhagavan was sitting nearby on a bench outside the hall where he usually slept, listening to a group of brahmin boys chant extracts from the *Vedas*. As I looked at the scene in front of me the world completely lost its solid, substantial reality. I became aware that everything I was perceiving in that scene was nothing more than a dream-like projection. This experience gave me the certainty that everything in the world, including the body of Bhagavan that I was concentrating on, was unreal. As I gazed at the scene I had the knowledge and the experience that the real Ramana Maharshi was not the dream body I saw before me, it was the formless, effulgent Self that I had

experienced on the dried-up lakebed in Gudur. This experience soon passed away though, leaving me in my former state.

I divided my time between sitting with Bhagavan at the times he was available and sitting in solitary meditation on the hill. I only stayed three days on this first visit, but that short period of time was enough to convince me that in Bhagavan I had found the Guru I had been seeking. I decided to change my *japa* from '*Hare* Rama' to '*Hare* Ramana' since I felt that I could avail myself of my Guru's grace by chanting his name. I read the Telugu version of *Who Am I?* which was on sale at the ashram bookstore while I was there, but I didn't feel inclined to take up the practice of self-enquiry at the time because I was more accustomed to doing *japa*.

After three days I left my mother at Ramanasramam and went back to Gudur. I wanted to devote myself full time to meditation but the atmosphere in my house was too oppressive for proper concentration. I decided instead to go to a village called Govindapalli, which was nearer the coast and about fifteen miles from Gudur. Some of my relatives lived in this village but I didn't want to stay with them. I just wanted a quiet place where I could meditate without being disturbed. I selected a quiet spot, away from the village and about three miles from the sea. My relatives helped me to build a small hut, which I paid for out of my own funds.

I moved into this hut and spent most of my time in meditation. Milk was sent once a day from the village, but I prepared the rest of my food myself, cooking it on a small fire that I would build by the side of my hut. I still kept up with the habit of getting up at 3 a.m. and going for a swim. Sometimes I swam in a tank near my hut and sometimes in a small river that flowed nearby. In the evenings I often walked to the beach and swam in the sea.

The local people had been very cooperative in the matter of building the hut, but many of them had advised me not to live on the spot I chose because there was supposed to be an evil spirit that inhabited the area. I wasn't worried about things like that, so I settled down to do my *sadhana*. After staying there for a few days I heard a great noise that sounded as if all the trees in the vicinity were being blown down by a great wind. I went out of the hut and looked around me. I saw that the trunks of all the local trees were bending down to the ground and then

springing back up again. Since there was no obvious natural explanation, I decided that it was this local spirit that was trying to frighten me. These spirits are harmless so long as you do not fear them, but if you become afraid, some of them are so strong, they can easily kill you. I ignored it and went back to my meditation.

My meditation proceeded very well. The constant repetition of my Guru's name made my mind very quiet. On a few occasions it became absolutely still. When this happened the question 'Who am I?' would spontaneously arise inside me. Whenever this happened, as if in answer to the question, my mind would automatically sink into its source, the Heart, and experience the bliss of the Self. I never made any conscious attempt to practise self-enquiry. The question 'Who am I?' simply appeared inside me whenever my mind became completely free from thoughts.

My stay in Govindapalli lasted about five months. At the end of that period I contracted a severe case of malaria and had to be taken back to Gudur. The doctor who examined me there decided that I was likely to die. He informed my relatives, many of whom then came to see me to pay their last respects. I had no intention of dying. I had a strong determination that I would not die until I had seen my Guru again. I placed a picture of Ramana Maharshi by my bedside and willed myself to stay alive long enough to see him again. I meditated on this picture throughout the ordeal. Whenever I looked at it I felt as if Bhagavan himself was laughing or smiling at me. I am convinced that it was the power and the grace of Bhagavan that kept me alive and enabled me to make a full recovery.

I was in bed for nearly two months. Towards the end of that period I became a little despondent about my apparent lack of spiritual progress.[4]

As soon as I was able to walk I told my family that I wanted to return to Tiruvannamalai to have Bhagavan's *darshan*. Both

[4] 'The body could escape from the jaws of death, but I could not escape from the ever-yawning mouth of the tiger, ego. I could not suppress the surge of egoism. How to efface it? I was much perturbed and gazed at the portrait of Bhagavan. From Bhagavan's face flowed grace and compassion in abundance.'

Taken from *Yogeeswara Sri Lakshmana, a Biography*, p. 10.

my mother and my brother tried to convince me that I was too weak to travel, but I refused to listen to their advice. There were some heated arguments about the matter but when it became clear that my family would not give me permission to go, I walked out on them, vowing never to return to their house again. As I left I drew three long vertical lines on the doorframe of my family home. This is a traditional symbol that indicated to my family that I had no intention of ever entering their house again. When my brother finally realised that I could not be persuaded to stay, he very reluctantly gave me Rs 60 to take care of my immediate expenses.

I set off for Ramanasramam immediately and arrived during the Navaratri celebrations of 1949.[5] The second day of my visit was Vijayadasami, the final day of the festival. In the afternoon I stood in front of the Mathrubhuteswara Temple, waiting for Bhagavan to appear. He came out of his small room, accompanied by Swami Satyananda, entered the new hall that was in front of the temple and took his seat on the stone sofa. There were only a few devotees present at the time. I went up to Bhagavan and made a full prostration in front of him. When I stood up, Bhagavan looked intently at me for a few moments. I withdrew and went to look for a place where I could do self-enquiry and not be disturbed by the other devotees. I selected a pillar that was outside the door that Bhagavan had entered through and sat down in front of it. Though I was outside the hall, Bhagavan could still see me from where he was sitting. Shortly afterwards I saw Muruganar taking a seat close to Bhagavan. I noticed that other devotees were entering the hall. After a few minutes Muruganar came and sat down next to me. A few other devotees came and sat near us. I closed my eyes and began to do 'Who am I?', the quest for the Self.

Within a few minutes I found that all thoughts had disappeared except for the primal 'I'-thought. The question 'Who am I?' then spontaneously appeared within me. As it did so, the gracious smiling face of Ramana Maharshi appeared within me on the right side of the chest. There was something like a lightning flash that resulted in a flood of divine light shining both within and without. Bhagavan's face was still smiling on the right side of my chest. It seemed to be lit up with a radiance

[5] This is a ten-day celebration that occurs in September or October.

that exceeded innumerable lightning flashes rolled into one. The bliss and joy these experiences gave me brought tears to my eyes. A torrential flow welled up within me and rolled down my face. I was unable to control them in any way. Finally, the 'I'-thought went back to its source, the internal picture of Ramana Maharshi disappeared, and the Self absorbed my whole being. From that moment on the Self shone alone and the 'I'-thought, the individual self, never arose or functioned in me again. It was permanently destroyed through the grace of my Guru in his holy presence.[6]

I remained absorbed in the Self, without body consciousness, for about three hours. The experience was so intense, even when I opened my eyes I found I was incapable of either speaking or moving. The realisation had caused an immense churning within the nervous system, so much so that when body consciousness returned, I felt extremely weak.

When I was finally able to register what was going on around me, I noticed that everything was perfectly normal. Bhagavan was still sitting on his couch and all the assembled devotees were pursuing their normal duties and activities. My tears and my loss of consciousness had not attracted any attention at all.

I remained where I was for another three hours because I was incapable of movement of any kind. I remember hearing the dinner bell and the noise of the Vijayadasami procession as it went round the temple,[7] but I was too absorbed in the Self to contemplate either eating or joining in the celebrations. At 9 p.m. I finally rose to my feet and very slowly made my way back to my allotted place in the men's dormitory.

The following morning I still felt very weak. Thinking that I might feel better if I ate some food, I started to walk towards town to see if I could get a meal at one of the hotels there. Unfortunately, I overestimated my strength. Before I could find a place to eat, I had an attack of dizziness and collapsed on the

[6] When I asked Lakshmana Swamy if he wanted to elaborate on this brief description in any way, his reply was even more terse: 'The "I" went back to its source, the Self, and disappeared without trace. The Self remained alone. It is eternal peace and bliss.'

[7] The place where Lakshmana Swamy was sitting was very close to the route that was used to take the Goddess around the temple precincts. The procession must have passed within inches of where he was sitting.

street. A friendly passer-by took me under his wing, ascertained that I needed food, and then guided me to a hotel that was located on the south side of the temple. I felt much stronger after the meal and I had no difficulty returning to the ashram.

Later that afternoon I went up to Bhagavan in the *darshan* hall, prostrated before him, and handed him a note via his attendant Venkataratnam. The note, which I had written in Telugu said, 'Bhagavan, in your presence and by the quest ["Who am I?"] I have realised the Self'.

Bhagavan read the note, looked at me for a moment, and then his face lit up in a radiant smile. For some time we just looked at each other.

Bhagavan broke the silence by asking me where I had come from.

'Gudur,' I replied.

'That's in Nellore District, isn't it?' enquired Bhagavan.

'Yes,' I answered.

This was the only conversation I ever had with Bhagavan. After giving him these two brief replies, I didn't speak again for another thirteen years.[8]

As I returned to my place in the hall I heard Bhagavan tell Venkataratnam to keep my note on a shelf that was behind his sofa.

Accommodation was in short supply at the ashram. After four days I was asked to leave to make room for other visitors who wanted to see Bhagavan. I decided to look for accommodation in the surrounding area since I planned to stay permanently. I had no intention of going back to Gudur. Before I left home my family had agreed to send me the rental income that came from my half of my grandfather's house. The amount was more than enough to live on. Raja Iyer, the local postmaster, helped me to find a small thatched house about 250 yards from the ashram. I shared it with a boy called Raghavan who was already living there. Since I had money and he didn't, he agreed to do all the cooking if I bought the food.

[8] When I once asked him why he had remained silent for so long, he replied, 'The experience of the Self is beyond words and speech. It is impossible to explain it or talk about it. Since there was nothing I could say about it, I kept quiet.'

Lakshmana Swamy finally resumed speaking in 1963 and his first words were a brief talk on *Upadesa Saram*.

One of the first people to visit me in my new house was Venkataratnam, Bhagavan's attendant.

On his first visit he said, 'In all the years I have been Bhagavan's attendant, I have never seen anyone present a note like this before. I am experienced enough in the ways of Bhagavan to know that the beaming smile he immediately gave you was proof that the claim was genuine. Bhagavan made no comment to me about your note and the message it contained, but he did ask me to check up on you to make sure that all your needs are being taken care of and that you are properly looked after.'

From that day on Venkataratnam became a regular visitor. He would come and sit with me whenever his services were not required in the ashram, and on one occasion he embarrassed me by trying to massage my feet and legs.

Bhagavan was giving *darshan* every day from nine to eleven in the morning and from three till six in the afternoon. At those times I would go and sit with him in the ashram. Around midday I would walk to town and eat a meal in a hotel, and at the end of the afternoon *darshan* I would sit for an hour on the lower slopes of Arunachala. I had no further interaction with Bhagavan, but every time I went to see him in the hall, his face would light up and break out into the same radiant smile he had given me on the afternoon I had presented him with my note.

After about three months in Tiruvannamalai, I moved to Palakottu. I found a small room I could occupy by myself and moved in. I paid one rupee a month rent to the watchman of the Ganesh Temple that bordered Palakottu Tirtham and I engaged a young girl to bring a cooked lunch to me since I no longer felt like making the daily trip to town to eat.[9]

A woman called Marakatha Mataji also tried to feed me, but her attentions were a bit of a nuisance. She had a great liking for *sadhus* and she spent most of the money she earned on feeding them. When rich visitors came to the ashram, she would offer her services as a cook. She was very good at her job and her employers, including at least one *maharani*, were always satisfied with her cooking. She often used to make sweets for her employers, and when she did so, she would always contrive

[9] Walking to town and back would be a round trip of over two miles.

to keep a few for the *sadhus* near the ashram. Any cash payment she received would also be converted into sweets for *sadhus*. At distribution time she always tried to give the recipients a big kiss along with the sweets. I became a favourite of hers and she frequently tried to ambush me with a sweet and a kiss as I was leaving my room. If I knew she was there, I would stay in my room in the hope that she would give up waiting and go away, but she had enormous patience and sometimes I had to put up with her ministrations. She also tried to kiss Bhagavan on many occasions, but her habits were well known and his attendants had strict instructions to keep her away from him.[10]

Bhagavan's health was deteriorating very quickly and the *darshan* hours were often drastically curtailed. He had a sarcoma in his arm and the toxic by-products were spreading to the rest of his body. Several operations had failed to check the damage. After one such operation, he gave *darshan* lying on a couch outside the ashram dispensary. His eyes were nearly closed as I approached him, but as I stood before him, Bhagavan opened his eyes and gave me his usual radiant smile. I was so engulfed by this smile, I forgot to give the customary *namaste* greeting [palms together in front of the chest], and the ashram manager had to remind me to do it. After I left, Bhagavan relapsed into his former state.

Though I never sought to attract Bhagavan's attention, he always seemed to know if I was in his vicinity, even if he couldn't see me. On an earlier occasion, when Bhagavan was giving *darshan* in the new hall, his view of me was completely obscured by a newspaper that one of his attendants was holding. He immediately asked the attendant to remove the newspaper and then beamed his usual smile at me.

As the *darshan* hours became less and less, I began to spend more and more time sitting quietly in my room. I did *pradakshina* of Arunachala once a week, and I still sat on the mountain every evening, but my life was beginning to enter a new phase. I would spend hours and hours each day sitting in my room in a thought-free state in which I had no awareness of either my body or the world. This tendency to withdraw into the Self became stronger and stronger as the weeks and months went by.

[10] An entertaining account of her attempts to hug Bhagavan can be found in *The Power Of The Presence, Part One*, pp. 204–5.

By April 1950 it was clear to everyone that Bhagavan was about to give up his body. The cancer had debilitated him to such an extent, he could barely move. About a week before his death I was walking around the Mother's Temple, the one which was being consecrated on my first visit to the ashram. On my way round I stopped to look at a statue of Ganesh that had been recently garlanded. As I gazed at the statue, it began to move in its niche. The head and shoulders started to rock backwards and forwards, and each time it rocked forwards, the bowed head of Ganesh moved nearer and nearer to mine. I suddenly realised that if I stayed there any longer, the garland would slip from the statue's neck onto my own. I didn't want to be garlanded in this way, so I moved away from the statue and continued my walk around the temple.[11]

A week later, on the evening of April 14th, I was cleaning my room in Palakottu when a picture of Bhagavan, which was normally kept on a stool in the corner of the room, fell to the ground. I put it back in its usual place, making sure that it was not in a position that would cause it to overbalance again. A few minutes later it fell to the ground for a second time. I felt intuitively this was a sign that Bhagavan was dead or dying. I felt a strong urge to go to the ashram, but before I could leave I lost awareness of the world and I became wholly absorbed in the Self for a period of about two or three hours. Consciousness of the world returned shortly before 9 p.m. when I heard a great noise coming from the ashram. I knew then for certain that Bhagavan was dead. I rushed to the back gate of the ashram, the nearest gate to his room, only to find that the police had already locked it.[12]

By the time I made my way into the ashram by the front gate, Bhagavan's body had already been removed from the room where he had died. It had been put on display outside it. Later

[11] When I asked Lakshmana Swamy why he didn't want to be garlanded, he replied, 'I didn't want to walk out of the temple with this garland round my neck. The ashram authorities would just assume that I had stolen it. My explanation would not have been believable, so I walked away before the garlanding could happen.'

[12] The police were there because the ashram authorities were afraid that the massive crowds might get out of control when Bhagavan died. To reduce the numbers an announcement had been made earlier in

that night, when most of the grieving devotees had left, it was taken inside the new hall.

I had seen Bhagavan for the last time earlier that day. On that occasion, as we looked into each other's eyes, I experienced such a strong wave of ecstatic bliss, I became completely oblivious of my surroundings. Now, seeing Bhagavan's lifeless body, I experienced very little emotion. People were crying all around me and my first reaction was that I too should shed a few tears for my Guru. But no tears came. I was unhappy that Bhagavan had died, but at the same time I was unable to cry or participate in the sorrow of the other devotees because I knew that nothing had really happened. I knew that Bhagavan was the Self before he gave up the body and I knew that he was the same Self afterwards. Filled with this awareness that nothing had really happened, I left the thousands of grieving devotees and silently returned to my room.

Most of Bhagavan's devotees left the area within a few days of the funeral, but since I had no urge to go anywhere, I remained in my room in Palakottu. In the weeks and months that followed, my health began to deteriorate. I spent most of my time in my room in a state of deep *samadhi* in which it was impossible for me to pay any attention to the body's needs. When the girl who cooked for me brought me my midday meal, I often ignored it. Sometimes I ate it, but mostly I gave it back to the girl to eat herself. After several weeks of living like this, my body began to waste away. I started to get attacks of dizziness when I stood up and my digestive system started to malfunction. One attack of food poisoning left me so weak, I discovered I didn't even have the strength to pull a bucket of water out of the Palakottu tank. When I put the bucket in the water and pulled, the weight of the water pulled me into the tank. In my weakened state I was lucky to survive at all. One *sadhu* I knew succumbed to cholera and died, and there was an epidemic of malaria in the area that was also claiming many lives.

I ignored all these events and continued to sit quietly in my room. While I was inside I only ever wore a *kaupina*, but none of the thousands of mosquitoes that shared the room with me

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the evening to the effect that Bhagavan was in no danger and that everyone should go home. Most people remained.

ever bothered to bite me. The only other occupant of the room was a squirrel that used to sit on my lap when I was in *samadhi*. I used to keep some peanuts near me, and whenever I emerged from *samadhi*, the squirrel would eat a few out of my hand.

News of my weakened condition reached my relatives in Gudur. Despite our previous quarrels they were still concerned about me. They asked me to return to Gudur where I could be properly looked after, but I refused to leave. Sometime later my mother and brother came to visit for a few days. When they discovered the extent to which I was neglecting my body, they renewed their attempts to get me to come back to Gudur. My brother offered to build a hut for me where I could live alone and also undertook to provide me with food. I again refused, saying that I didn't want to leave Arunachala.

I spent a total of nine months in Palakottu, mostly just sitting quietly in my room. Towards the end of this period my skin turned yellow and it stayed that way for the next three years. Around October 1950 I finally admitted to myself that I was no longer capable of looking after my body. I had no one to take care of me, and I was never aware of my body for long enough to do the job myself. Reluctantly, I decided that I would accept my brother's offer, go back to Gudur and let my family look after me.[13]

[13] Lakshmana Swamy spent most of the next three years in *samadhi*, living in a small hut that his family built for him. Because of his ascetic lifestyle – he was sitting in *padmasana* for twenty hours a day and rarely eating – he attracted a large following. He tried to avoid everyone by remaining locked inside his hut, but when he announced that he would meet with people who wanted to see him twice a year, he was mobbed by tens of thousands of people. When he finally began to live a more normal life in the late 1950s, eating normally and going for walks, the visitors mostly stopped coming. Most of them thought that he had fallen from his previous high state. From the mid-fifties on, he lived a secluded life in a house near Gudur that had been provided for him by a devotee from Nellore. He began to meet with people on a regular basis in the 1960s, but he always preferred to live a private, solitary life. Around 1990 he moved back to Tiruvannamalai. Nowadays, he rarely meets people who want to visit him, and in the last few years it has only been possible to see him on five designated public *darshan* days.

Viswanatha Swami

Sri Viswanatha Swami (1904-79) was a distant relative of Bhagavan. His father, a cousin of Bhagavan, had been brought up by Bhagavan's mother in Tiruchuzhi. In his youth Viswanatha was an active Gandhian, but his political activities petered out after he came under the influence of Bhagavan in 1921. From 1922 until 1950 he spent most of his time either with Bhagavan or with Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni.

Sri Viswanatha Swami was a good Tamil and Sanskrit scholar. In addition to translating several Ramanasramam publications from English and Sanskrit into Tamil, he also translated works by Swami Ramdas and Mahatma Gandhi. Towards the end of his life he was the editor of The Mountain Path, *the journal published by Sri Ramanasramam.*

Sri Viswanatha Swami was one of the most widely respected of Bhagavan's devotees. In fact, when Bhagavan passed away, a committee which had been formed to manage the ashram recommended that he and Muruganar should be allowed to remain in Sri Ramanasramam for ever, without any work being assigned to them, because they best embodied the spirit of Bhagavan and his teachings.

Although Sri Viswanatha Swami was happy to record the experiences that other devotees had with Bhagavan, he was rather reluctant to write about himself. This reluctance stemmed partly from his innate humility and partly from an inability to communicate in words the nature of the transformation that Bhagavan effected in him. He once wrote: 'Sri Bhagavan's most powerful presence completely annihilated my ego; I can't say anything more.'

My first *darshan* of Bhagavan Sri Ramana was in January 1921 at Skandashram. Located on the eastern slope of Arunachala, Skandashram looks from a distance like the very heart of the majestic hill. It was, and still is, a beautiful, quiet spot with a few coconut and other trees, and a perennial, crystal-clear spring.

When I first saw Bhagavan, I saw in him something quite

arresting which clearly distinguished him from all others I had seen. He seemed to live apart from the physical frame, quite detached from it. His look and smile had a remarkable spiritual charm. When he spoke, the words seemed to come out of an abyss. One could see immaculate purity and non-attachment in him and his movements. I sensed something very refined, lofty and sacred about him. In his vicinity the mind's distractions were overpowered by an austere and potent calmness. In his presence the unique bliss of peace was directly experienced. This I would call Ramana *Lahari*, 'The blissful atmosphere of Ramana'. In this ecstasy of grace one loses one's sense of separate individuality and there remains something grand and all-pervading, all-devouring. This indeed is the spirit of Arunachala that swallows up the whole universe in its gracious effulgence.

When I first saw Bhagavan, he was standing on the open space in front of the ashram building. The very sight of him thrilled me. Something very subtle, seemingly with its centre in that body, shone forth, without limitation, engulfing everything else. Needless to say I felt swallowed up by it. I stayed for a week with Bhagavan in that atmosphere of utter purity and serenity. I heard from him how he had come to Arunachala, irresistibly attracted and swept off his feet by a tremendous benevolent force; how, deep down within his heart, he was one with that power. I also learned that after his arrival at Arunachala he had been almost oblivious of his body and surroundings. I was told that it was only later on that he gradually regained the use of his senses, enabling him to look outwards and commune with others when they approached him.

On my first visit there were about ten devotees living with him, including his mother and younger brother. One of them was Vallimalai Murugan who, for a while every morning, sang the Tamil songs of the *Tiruppugazh* with great fervour. These well-known songs, the remarkable outpourings of the famous saint, Sri Arunagirinatha, are songs in praise of Subramaniam. When he sang, Bhagavan used to keep time by tapping with two small sticks on the two rings of an iron brazier of live coal that was kept in front of him. Fumes of incense spread out in rolls from the brazier, suffused with the subtle holy atmosphere of Bhagavan. While Bhagavan's hands were tapping at the brazier in this way, his unfathomable look of grace gave one a

glimpse of the beyond in silence. It was an unforgettable experience.

There was also a devotee from Chidambaram, Subramanya Iyer, who often sang with great fervour the hymns in praise of Arunachala written by Bhagavan, songs in praise of Bhagavan written by his devotees, and hymns from the *Tiruvachakam*. One morning, when he began a song with the refrain 'Ramana *Sadguru*, Ramana *Sadguru*, Ramana *Sadguru rayane*', Bhagavan also joined in the singing. The devotees were amused and began to laugh at Bhagavan himself singing his own praise.

While they were expressing their amusement, Bhagavan commented, 'What is extraordinary about it? Why should one limit Ramana to a form of six feet? Is it not the all-pervading divinity that you adore when you sing "Ramana *Sadguru*, Ramana *Sadguru*"? Why should I not also join in the singing?' We all felt lifted to Bhagavan's standpoint.

Before beginning their day's work, the inmates of the ashram would get up at dawn and sing some devotional songs in praise of both Arunachala and Bhagavan Ramana. During one of these sessions, after Niranjanananda Swami had told Bhagavan that I could recite hymns in Sanskrit, Bhagavan looked at me expectantly. Seeing that it was impossible to avoid it, I recited a few verses.

When I had finished Bhagavan gently looked at me and said. 'You have learned all this. Not so in my case. Before I came here I knew nothing and had learned nothing. Some mysterious power took possession of me and effected a thorough transformation. Whoever knew then what was happening to me? Your father, who was intending in his boyhood to go to the Himalayas for *tapas*, became the head of a big family. And I, who knew nothing, have been drawn and kept here for good! When I left home in my seventeenth year, I was like a speck swept away by a tremendous flood. I knew neither my body nor the world, whether it was day or night. It was difficult even to open my eyes – the eyelids seemed to be glued down. My body became a mere skeleton. Visitors pitied my plight because they were not aware how blissful I was. It was only years later that I came across the term '*Brahman*' when I happened to look into some books on Vedanta which had been brought to me. I was amused and said to myself, 'Is this [experience or state] known as *Brahman*?'

One of the earliest of Bhagavan's devotees, Sivaprakasam Pillai, has referred to this early ignorance at the beginning of *Sri Ramana Charita Ahaval*, his brief Tamil verse biography of Bhagavan. In that work he called Bhagavan, 'One who became a knower of *Brahman* without knowing even the term *Brahman*'.

Finding that I knew a little Sanskrit, Bhagavan asked me to take a copy of *Sri Ramana Gita* and give it to my father. I did so, and it was only after going through it that my father understood Bhagavan. At that time I had not studied its contents myself. It was only at the end of 1922 that I happened to go through the thrilling verses in praise of Bhagavan Ramana that comprise the eighteenth chapter. I was so profoundly moved by them, I made up my mind to return to Bhagavan for good. I had already been thinking of dedicating myself solely to spiritual pursuits. It was the reading of *Sri Ramana Gita* at this critical juncture of my life that made me decide that my spiritual future lay with Bhagavan.

I returned to Bhagavan for good on the evening of January 2nd 1923 and surrendered myself at his feet. Just a fortnight before that date, Bhagavan had come down the hill to live near his mother's *samadhi*. His mother had been liberated by him in May 1922 but it was not until December of that year that he took up full-time residence near her grave. The new ashram was in a very primitive state at that time. There were only two huts made of coconut leaves, one being the living quarters and the other the kitchen. I entered the hut where Bhagavan was staying and saw him reclining peacefully on an elevated dais.

As I bowed and stood before him, he asked me, 'Did you get the permission of your parents to come here?'

Bhagavan must have sensed that I had run away from home, without telling anyone. I had not informed my family because I knew that my father would never have given me permission to live full-time with Bhagavan. I tried to evade the question by telling Bhagavan that since he himself had irresistibly attracted me to his feet, it was not necessary for him to ask such a question. With a smile, Bhagavan advised me to inform my parents of my whereabouts so that they would not worry about what I had done. I wrote to my father the next day and saw his letter to the ashram enquiring about me the day after.

I soon discovered that the power and the presence of Bhagavan were so strong, there was no necessity to undertake

any formal kind of *sadhana*. I shared in the work of the ashram in Bhagavan's elevating company, I studied his literary works and I heard his replies to the various questions put by visitors. But all these activities were incidental. The most important thing was the mere presence, the spiritually uplifting company of Bhagavan. As Bhagavan says in *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*: 'If one associates with sages, where is the need for any other rigorous *sadhana*? No one looks for a fan when there is the pleasant southern breeze.'

During the course of my stay with Bhagavan, I happened to find a collection of hymns in praise of Sri Ramana recorded in a big bound notebook. Going through it I came across a *Hymn of 108 Names of Bhagavan Ramana* composed by a man called Sankarananda Bharati of Uttarkashi, who had stayed with Bhagavan on the hill. Going through it I found the name *Sri Sringadri-Mathadhisa Bhavitah*, which means, 'One revered by the head of the Sringeri Math', and asked Bhagavan what it meant. He told me that the reference was to Sri Narasimha Bharati Swami of Sringeri who, many years before, had intuitively recognised Bhagavan's high state. This man retained his high regard for Bhagavan. If devotees from Tiruvannamalai came to see him, he would generally ask them, 'How is the Bala Yogi [child yogi] of Tiruvannamalai? Is he well?'

As Bhagavan was telling me this, I was transported back in time to the days of my youth and childhood. When I was five years old I had met Sri Narasimha Bharati Swami and received some *prasad* from his hands. At that time I did not know who he was. Although I was very young, I still remember being impressed by his dignity, his lustre and his spontaneous love.

Years later, when I was thirteen, I happened to be looking at a beautiful collection of Sri Sankara's works in my father's library. Finding one of the books to be of a different size, I took it out and saw that it bore the title, *Bhakti-Sudha-Tarangini* (*Waves of the Nectar of Devotion*). As I opened the book, I found in the frontispiece the majestic and lovely figure of the swami who had given me *prasad* in my sixth year and saw that he was the famous Sri Narasimha Bharati Swami, the head of the Sringeri Math. Though so many years had passed, the impress left on my mind was so vivid, I spontaneously recognized his identity. I went through his short biography in English at the beginning and his thrilling hymns in Sanskrit in praise of the various aspects

of divine splendour. I immensely enjoyed his superb devotional poetry. It pleased me to think that this man, who had introduced me to the spiritual life by impressing me with his saintliness, should have had such a high regard for Bhagavan.

A week after I arrived, I got the permission of Bhagavan to live on *madhukari,* that is, begged food. After giving me permission, Bhagavan reminisced about his own experiences of living this way:

'I have experience of it myself; I lived on such food during my stay at Pavalakundru [a small hillock in the town of Tiruvannamalai]. I did it to avoid devotees bringing me special rich food. It is altogether different from professional mendicancy. You feel yourself to be independent and indifferent to everything worldly. It has a purifying effect on the mind.'

On the day I arrived at the ashram to stay for good, I noticed that there were many devotees visiting the ashram. They had all assembled for the forty-third birthday of Bhagavan, which was due to be celebrated on the following day. I wanted to ask Bhagavan some questions, but I didn't want to trouble him while all the crowds were milling around him. It was not until after they had all left that I approached him with my problem.

'Bhagavan,' I asked, 'how am I to rise above my present animal existence? My own efforts in that direction have proved futile and I am convinced that only a superior power can transform me. That is what has brought me here.'

Bhagavan replied with great compassion: 'Yes, you are right. It is only by awakening a power mightier than the senses and the mind that these can be subdued. If you awaken and nurture the growth of that power within you, everything else will be conquered. One should sustain the current of meditation uninterruptedly. Moderation in food and similar restraints will be helpful in maintaining the inner poise.'

It was this gracious advice of Bhagavan that gave a new direction to my spiritual career. A new faith was kindled within me and I found in Bhagavan the strength and support to guide me forever.

On another day, when I questioned him about the problem of *brahmacharya* [celibacy], Bhagavan replied: 'To live and move in *Brahman* is real *brahmacharya.* Continence, of course, is very helpful and indispensable to achieve that end. But so long as you identify yourself with the body, you can never escape sex-

thoughts and distractions. It is only when you realise that you are formless pure awareness that sex-distinction disappears for good. That is *brahmacharya*, effortless and spontaneous.'

I also asked him about the nature of the spiritual heart. 'When did you first discover the heart to be on the right side? Did you find it there even in Madurai?'

'Yes,' replied Bhagavan, 'it became clear then. But don't bother about the centre in the physical body, even though we have to accept it to explain the functioning of the individual. Let your attention be rather on the source of consciousness in yourself. It is only after the springing up of the "I"-thought, after it identifies itself with a body, that the problem of the centre arises. You have to go to the very source of the "I"-thought, where there is no limiting "I"-thought and no problems.'

To a devotee who thought that this method would lead to a destruction of the mind and who consequently felt that Self-realisation meant that he would cease to exist, Bhagavan once remarked, 'Many fear that with the destruction of the mind, they themselves will cease to exist. But *manonasa* [destruction of the mind] is nothing to be feared. What we conceive of now as mind is only a combination of *rajas* and *tamas*. By their elimination, the mind becomes pure. Such a mind is one's own *swarupa* [real nature]. The activities of one whose mind has been purified by Self-attention will continue to be done. He will even appear to do the work with greater attention and involvement. Yet he is unaffected and always stays in the felicity of non-dual bliss.'

Four months after my arrival at Arunachala, my parents came there to have *darshan* of Bhagavan and to take me back home. Though they did not succeed in this latter intention, they were somehow consoled by Bhagavan before they returned. He asked them if it were possible to wean a person like me from a course I had taken with all my heart and soul.

Bhagavan told my parents that it would be right for them to try to discourage me from taking a wrong path, but he added, 'Since the course he has taken is intrinsically good, you should not worry about what will happen to him'.

My father was a cousin of Bhagavan. Though he was four or five years older than Bhagavan, he had known him very well as Venkataraman in the days before he left home for Tiruvannamalai. At the time of this first visit he had already

heard from others about Bhagavan's spiritual greatness, and he had also gone through his teachings in *Sri Ramana Gita*. However, he had not been sure of what his reaction would be on seeing Bhagavan. He decided to go to him with an open mind and judge for himself what he was. The moment he sighted Bhagavan in the stone *mantapam* across the road from Sri Ramanasramam, he was overpowered by a sense of genuine veneration.

He fell at his feet in adoration, saying, 'There is nothing of the Venkataraman whom I knew very well in what I see in front of me!'

Bhagavan replied with a smile: 'That person disappeared for ever a long time ago.'

My father then explained that he had not visited Bhagavan before because he felt that he had not generated enough dispassion and non-attachment to approach such a great sage.

Bhagavan replied, 'Is that so? You seem to be obsessed by the delusion that you are going to achieve these things in the distant future. If you recognise your real nature, the Self, to what can it be attached? Dispassion is our real nature.'

Since the ashram buildings were being repaired, Bhagavan was staying in a huge stone *mantapam* on the other side of the road from the ashram. Devotees had his *darshan* there, but at meal times we all moved back over the road and ate our meals under the shade of a huge mango tree that was located on the ashram's land. Water from the ashram well was stored in big pots under this tree because it was the coolest place in the neighbourhood. At meal times we enjoyed the shade of the tree and the grace of Bhagavan which, like a cool breeze, blew off our torments.

Bhagavan advised me to engage myself in non-stop *japa*, day and night, except during hours of sleep. He also encouraged me to study his teachings. I subsequently studied *Sri Ramana Gita* in his presence, drinking in the import of every verse in it. In addition, I also had the good fortune of listening to Bhagavan explain the meaning of his hymns to Arunachala. This was done in a very informal way. During his morning and evening walks I would follow him and listen as he expounded in great detail the significance of each inspired verse.

Early one morning, when there was no one else near Bhagavan, he suggested that we both might go round Arunachala

and return before the others could notice his absence and begin to search for him. He took me by the forest path and suggested that Sankara's *Hymn in Praise of Dakshinamurthi* might be taken up for discussion on the way. We walked quickly and within three hours we had completed our walk. We ended up sitting at Pandava Tirtham, a tank located a little to the east of the ashram. In the early days of Sri Ramanasramam, Bhagavan often used to bathe in this tank.

I shall not pretend that I understood everything that Bhagavan said in explaining the import of the hymn. The spiritual exhilaration of being alone in his company was quite enough for me.

On the morning after Bhagavan's forty-third *jayanti*, my attention had been particularly gripped by a radiant personality who stood out in the gathering of devotees. He was, as I came to know, Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni. At once I saw that he was not merely a learned man, he was also a poet and a *tapasvin*. His broad forehead, bright eyes, aquiline nose, charming face and beard, and the melodious ring in his voice – all these proclaimed that he was a *rishi* to be ranked with the foremost of the vedic seers. I soon had the privilege of meeting him because Bhagavan thought that it would be beneficial for me to study under him.

I had learned by heart, even before coming to Bhagavan, the three portions of the famous *Taittiriya Upanishad*, which nowadays are chanted every morning before Bhagavan's *samadhi*. When I expressed to Bhagavan my aspiration to learn the import of this *Upanishad*, he directed me to Ganapati Muni, familiarly known as Nayana, who was then living in the Mango Tree Cave on the eastern slope of Arunachala. This cave had been Bhagavan's summer residence during his early years on the hill. It was a cool spot, located in the shade of a big mango tree, with a clear spring of water a little above it. I went to the cave and waited at its outer precincts. Within a few minutes Ganapati Muni came out. There was the fragrance of *tapas* in his presence and in the whole atmosphere. After sitting in silence before him for a few minutes, I asked him for the explanation of a passage in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* that embodies the experience of sage Trisanku. It begins '*Aham vrikshasya rariva*' and means, 'I am the force operating behind the Tree of Existence'. Nayana gave such a lucid and illuminating

explanation of it, I decided there was no need to ask him any further questions. Every word coming out of his mouth had scriptural clarity and sanctity.

Even though he was a great scholar and *tapasvin*, he used to direct to Bhagavan all those who went to him, saying, 'To learn from him first hand has a special effect'. And Bhagavan, on his part, used to send those who approached him with questions on traditional worship to Nayana, as he was the accepted authority on the subject. Such was the relationship between the Master and his famous disciple. I had many opportunities to notice the special regard Bhagavan had for this learned poet-disciple who, from his early youth, dedicated his whole life to *tapas*.

In 1929 Nayana lived for four months in a small tiled room facing the Ganapati Temple of Palakottu. During that period I had the rare privilege of sharing his room and serving him. He was a very simple man with few physical wants, so it was a pleasure to serve him. It involved no physical or mental strain at all. Having a natural inner poise, he was always relaxed, despite his brilliance and quick wit. Everyone felt the warmth of his friendliness and the air of purity and peace about him.

It was no wonder therefore that Bhagavan Ramana, despite his equal vision, had some special regard and love for him. This expressed itself in many ways. During these early years Bhagavan used to go alone, without an attendant, for his short afternoon stroll through Palakottu. At these times he would often drop in on Nayana and spend a few minutes with him. The familiarity with which Bhagavan moved with his intimate devotees was heart-warming. But, ultimately, it was neither what he did nor what he said that mattered. It was his glorious presence, shining all around, that attracted us all to him.

Bhagavan was opposed to any sort of waste or extravagance. 'How do you light the fire in your charcoal stove?' he asked me one day.

I told him that I used a bit of old rag rolled up and dipped into kerosene. Smilingly, he scolded me for wasting kerosene when the fire could easily be lit with some of the dry twigs and leaves lying around, or with bits of waste paper.

On another occasion he saw some small bits of paper, about one inch by six, lying on the floor of Nayana's room and asked him if they were of any use to him. Nayana replied that they

were waste pieces. He had been cutting some sheets of paper to a uniform size. These strips were the leftover scraps.

Bhagavan said, 'I can stitch these pieces together and make a little notebook the size of a thumb and use it for writing something in'.

Nayana beamed with pleasure at this economy, but I, to save Bhagavan the trouble, offered to do it myself.

Perceiving my motive, Bhagavan remarked, 'All right, but you are to show me the stitched notebook and the use you make of it'.

When I undertook to do so, Bhagavan dropped the matter since he had confidence in my sincerity. As soon as Bhagavan had left I made a tiny notebook out of the bits of paper and wrote down in it the 108 verses of the *Indra Sahasra Nama Stotra* and its seven concluding verses that were composed by Ganapati Muni in 1929. This work contains a thousand names of Indra culled from the *Rig Veda*. Nayana composed this litany of names, adding no other words. 'Indra' refers here, of course, to the Supreme Being, not to the Indra of the *Puranas* who rises to a godly state by merit and again falls from it.

Bhagavan had appreciated the deep, spiritual significance of these names when they had been read out to him during the composition of the work. The next morning, when I showed Bhagavan the tiny notebook with the *Indra Sahasra Nama* written in it in small script, he scrutinized, as was his way, not only the contents but the stitching and the general appearance as well.

He then exclaimed with pleasure, 'You have kept your promise and made the best use of the bits of paper'.

Unfortunately, I somehow lost that precious notebook that was handled and perused by Bhagavan. I need not say how glad I shall be if this lost treasure is found.

One evening Nayana asked Bhagavan about the forests which at that time still existed on and around Arunachala, saying that he had been in forests in other parts of India but not here. Bhagavan, full of benevolence, at once offered to take him to see them.

He said with a radiant, almost boyish smile, 'Nayana, there is not an inch of ground on Arunachala that has not been trodden by these feet during the time when I was living on the hill, especially during the Virupaksha period. I have been up all the

hills and down all the valleys. I have roamed about in the interior regions where no forest guard would dare to go.'

One cloudy day, a few days later, I went to Bhagavan after lunch as usual. He was sitting alone. As soon as he saw me he asked what Nayana was doing and whether it would suit him to go for a walk in the forest. I replied that Nayana was writing something but would jump with joy and gladly drop it if he heard of Bhagavan's proposal.

'Go and tell him then, and be ready,' Bhagavan said. 'I will slip out of the ashram unobserved, so as to avoid a crowd, and meet you near your room.'

Bhagavan joined us a few minutes later and the three of us[1] wended our way towards the forest, led of course by Bhagavan, the born leader through uncharted regions, physical as well as spiritual. We entered the second forest path, cutting through the cattle-fair ground west of Palakottu. After passing the beautiful little temple of Draupadi, Bhagavan took us on to the third forest path that skirts the slopes of Arunachala at varying heights. We passed through a dense forest where creepers entwined the trees and bushes. There were a few streams, some of them flowing and some dried up. As we proceeded along the winding, rugged path, enjoying the beauty of the scenery and the ever-changing aspects of the changeless Arunachala, the clouds cleared away and let the sunlight in for a few minutes. Knowing that Nayana could not stand the heat of the sun on his head because of a yogic experience he had had a few years before, Bhagavan took us to a spreading tree that stood at the edge of a forest pond.

'See Nayana,' he said, 'this is the tree known as *ingudi,* which is famous for its cooling shade and medicinal properties. It is described in *Sakuntala* and other famous Sanskrit works. We call it *nilali* in Tamil because its shade wards off the effects of the hot sun very quickly.' And five minutes under the shade of the tree proved it to be so.

As soon as the clouds gathered overhead again, giving enough shade for Nayana to proceed, Bhagavan took us deeper into the forest. He found a very pleasant place for us to rest on the bed

[1] Bhagavan's attendant, Annamalai Swami, also accompanied the group. His account of the trip can be found in *Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, p. 27.

of a dried-up stream, shaded by a huge rock. We did not speak much. In such circumstances one does not feel like disturbing the eloquent silence of Bhagavan by indiscreet talk or even thought. His silence was his teaching, and none of us wanted to interrupt it.

Time passed unnoticed in the gripping presence of the Lord of Silence. Eventually Nayana suggested that it was getting rather late for Bhagavan's return to the ashram. Bhagavan remarked that if we waited a little longer, we could take advantage of the afternoon breeze. He added that the breeze would make our return walk very pleasant. A few minutes later the breeze did indeed start. At about the same time we heard the sound of someone moving through the bushes to the south. When I looked to see who it was, I saw Muruganar's head above the bushes and announced his presence to Bhagavan. Bhagavan, who was a marvellous actor, placed his finger along the side of his nose, as was his habit when surprised, and expressed astonishment that Muruganar could have penetrated so deeply into the forest and discovered us. Muruganar had by this time caught sight of us and heard our voices. A few minutes later he joined us and prostrated full-length before Bhagavan, his face flushed with emotion. Bhagavan immediately asked him how he had managed to find us in such an unfrequented spot, where even a forest guard would find it hard to do so.

Muruganar explained in a voice choked with emotion that he had been present when Nayana had expressed his wish to see the forests. He had heard Bhagavan offering to take him for a walk and had decided that he too would like to come with Bhagavan into the forest. Since that day, Muruganar, who lived in the Arunachaleswara Temple in town, had been coming daily to the ashram as early as possible in the afternoon since he believed that this was the time when Bhagavan would undertake the walk. On the day of our expedition Bhagavan was absent from the hall when he arrived. He soon ascertained that no one in the ashram had any knowledge of his whereabouts. Wasting no more time, he went straight to Nayana's room in Palakottu and found it locked. He asked the temple watchman where we were and was told that earlier in the afternoon Nayana and I had been seen walking with Bhagavan in the direction of the cattle-fair ground. Some intuition had then made him choose the path he did. Finding us was a remarkable feat, for we were

about two miles from the ashram when he found us.

All three of us returned with Bhagavan to the ashram, unaware of anything but Bhagavan's grace, the only reality, which shines through all forms and movements and plays hide-and-seek with us all.

The grace that Bhagavan was constantly emanating had been felt by mature devotees even in the late 1890s when Bhagavan was silent, unheralded, and largely unknown. The visit of Achyutadasa, who was one of the earliest to discern Bhagavan's greatness, clearly illustrates this. Achyutadasa had been known as Abboy Naidu before he renounced the world. He was skilled in playing upon the *mridangam* [drum], and had composed Tamil *kirtanas* [devotional songs] of great merit, which are both devotional and advaitic. Having heard about Sri Bhagavan he went to Gurumurtam, the temple in which Sri Bhagavan had briefly lived during the closing years of the last century. He sat in front of Sri Bhagavan, who was immersed in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, and waited.

When Sri Bhagavan opened his eyes, he paid his respects to him, massaged his feet and exclaimed with great devotional fervour, 'One may be a great scholar, an author or a composer, and everything else in the world. But it is indeed very rare to come across anyone actually established in the Self like you.'

He then announced to his own disciples that there was 'something very rare at Tiruvannamalai', meaning Sri Bhagavan.

Bhagavan's power occasionally impressed or subdued even those who were very sceptical about his state. Vilacheri Mani Iyer, who was a senior schoolmate of Bhagavan, is a good example of this. At school he was noted for his physical strength and for his rough dealing with anybody whom he disliked. His nickname, Pokkiri Mani (Rogue Mani) shows what most people thought of him. He never went to any temple to worship, nor had he ever bowed down before any god or man. A few years after Bhagavan had settled down in Tiruvannamalai, Vilacheri Mani Iyer took his mother to the temple at Tirupati. He only went on that trip because his mother needed someone to accompany her. His mother wanted to alight at Tiruvannamalai, which was on their way, to see Venkataraman [the boyhood name of Ramana Maharshi] whom she had known as a small boy at Tiruchuzhi. But Mani did not agree, saying that it was

not worth the trouble, so they went directly to Tirupati.

On their way back to Madurai the mother again pressed her son and he had to yield to her request. But he agreed only on condition that he was allowed to take Venkataraman back home to Madurai.

He said: 'It is not for *darshan* of this bogus *sadhu* that I am alighting at Tiruvannamalai, but to drag him by his ear and bring him back to Madurai. I am not a weakling. I shall succeed where his uncle, mother and brother have failed.'

'All right, do as you please,' answered his mother.

They both alighted at Tiruvannamalai and went up the hill to Virupaksha Cave where Bhagavan was then staying. The mother bowed to Bhagavan and sat down quietly. But the son, who remained standing, looked and looked at Bhagavan, and got more and more puzzled as he did so. There was no trace of the ordinary boy Venkataraman whom he had known. Something quite unexpected had happened. Instead of seeing his old friend, there was an effulgent Divine Being seated in front of him, absolutely still and silent. His heart melted for the first time in his life, tears rolled down his cheeks and his hair stood on end. He fell prostrate before Bhagavan and surrendered himself to him. He became a frequent visitor and a staunch devotee of Bhagavan.

He began to follow Bhagavan's teachings but he soon felt that he was in need of a more tangible method than the *vichara* – 'Who am I?' – and asked Bhagavan several times for a different technique. Initially, there was no response. But one day, when he went out for a walk on the hill with Bhagavan, he stood before him and said, 'I won't allow you to return unless you give me some suitable *upadesa*'.

Bhagavan replied, 'What is there to teach, Mani? Instead of saying 'Siva, Siva,' and keeping quiet, why do you ask for this and that?'

Mani Iyer fell down at Sri Bhagavan's feet with great joy and exclaimed, 'I have received my *upadesa* and initiation!'

From that moment he took up the *japa* of 'Siva, Siva' day and night; in the course of time it became one with his *prana* [life current]. He was totally transformed and his face shone with a divine radiance.

When Mani Iyer felt that his end was near, he stayed with

Bhagavan for a few days. Every morning he rolled his body round Bhagavan's hall.[2] When Bhagavan tried to stop him, he said, 'I do not know how else I can express my gratitude for what Bhagavan has done for me!'

He passed away a few days later.

Those who were spiritually highly evolved had no difficulty in recognising Bhagavan's state. One such man was Sri Narayana Guru of Kerala. He was well known both as a social reformer and as a man who had attained a high state through intense *tapas*. He once visited Sri Bhagavan at Skandashram. After paying his respects to Sri Bhagavan, he sat silently watching him. He saw many people, both young and old, paying their respects to him and passing on, while Bhagavan himself sat silently with unwinking, wide-open eyes. On this day Bhagavan took no particular notice of anybody. He did not enquire where any of his visitors had come from. There was no overt welcome for anyone, but all the time Bhagavan was beaming joyfully while the audience partook of his grace. At lunchtime Bhagavan invited Sri Narayana Guru to eat with him and the other devotees.

Later that day Sri Narayana Guru took leave of Bhagavan, saying, 'May it be the same way here also'.

He was asking that he might also be blessed with the same Self-realisation that Bhagavan had attained. Sri Bhagavan responded with a gracious smile.

After reaching Kerala, Sri Narayana Guru wrote five verses in Sanskrit, calling them *Nirvritti Panchakam* [Five Verses on Inner Felicity], and sent them to Bhagavan.

1 He alone enjoys the inner felicity of the One Self of all who refrains from enquiries about the name, native-land, caste or clan, calling and age of others.

2 He alone enjoys the inner felicity of the One Self of all who does not ask anyone to come, to go, not to go, to enter within, or where one is going.

3 He alone enjoys the inner felicity of the One Self of all who does not enquire of anybody where he is

[2] This is known as *anga pradakshina*. Some devotees even attempt to roll around Arunachala, with their heads facing the hill.

going, arriving from, or where and who he is.

4 He alone enjoys the inner felicity of the One Self of all who has no notion of differentiation such as I, you, he, that, within or without, existence or non-existence.

5 He alone enjoys the inner felicity of the One Self of all who remains the same with the known and unknown and is free from distinctions such as oneself and others and the assertion even of non-difference.

In later years Sri Narayana Guru used to be greatly pleased whenever any of his disciples visited Sri Bhagavan. On their return he would listen with delight to all the details of their visit.

At the end of 1948, a tiny growth about the size of a peanut was noticed on Bhagavan's left elbow. It gradually grew in size and became painful to the touch. By February 1949 it had grown into a tumour the size of a small lemon.[3] The doctor in charge of the ashram dispensary removed it surgically, and the wound healed up in about ten days. A month later, when the temple erected over his mother's *samadhi* was consecrated, he looked fit and well. Only a slight sagging of the skin around the elbow betrayed the recent operation.

Soon after the celebrations, the tumour returned. Eminent surgeons from Madras came and examined it. Suspecting it to be malignant, they removed it surgically on March 27th and subsequently treated the region with radium. An examination of the affected tissues showed that the growth was a sarcoma, a form of cancer.

When a fresh growth was observed, even before the surgical wound had healed up, the doctors suggested amputating the arm above the affected area. They thought that this would save Bhagavan's life.

Bhagavan smiled and remarked, 'There is no need for alarm. The body itself is a disease. Let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? Simple dressing of the affected part is enough.'

A medical board discussed the situation and decided that

[3] Indian lemons are generally quite small. A 'small' lemon probably indicates something about three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

an immediate operation was needed to save Bhagavan's life. Bhagavan was persuaded to agree to it. The third operation took place on August 7th, 1949. A week later it was followed by radium treatment which aimed to destroy the affected tissues.

The surgical wound healed and for the next three months Bhagavan's general health seemed to be improving. Hope revived in all hearts. But at the end of November, to the dismay of all, the tumour reappeared higher up on the arm. Bhagavan underwent a fourth operation on December 19th. After its conclusion the doctors all agreed that they could do nothing if the sarcoma appeared again, except administer palliatives.

Homeopathy was then tried for a few weeks, but it could not arrest the progress of the disease. Another tumour appeared adjoining the left armpit and it grew rapidly. Two Ayurvedic physicians of repute tried their treatments, but with no success. The whole of the left upper arm became one horrific swelling.

The constant oozing of blood through the wound made Bhagavan anaemic. As the poison from the sarcoma spread throughout his body, it soon became clear that his end was near.

Bhagavan remained unconcerned throughout this long period of pain and sickness. He had no personal inclination for any kind of treatment. Whenever a course of treatment was decided upon by the ashram management, he abided by it, rather to please the devotees than to get cured of the disease. He often said, 'It is for us to witness all that happens'. His behaviour in the last year of his life was a perfect illustration of this.

When his devotees were puzzled in December 1949 as to what further treatment to try, one of them approached Bhagavan and asked what should be done.

Bhagavan smiled and observed, 'Have I ever asked for any treatment? It is you who wanted this and that for me, so it is you who must decide. If I were asked I would always say, as I have been saying from the beginning, that no treatment is necessary. Let things take their own course.'

All the doctors who attended upon him were struck by his superhuman indifference to pain and his absolute unconcern even during and after operations. Bhagavan took everything lightly and retained his sense of humour throughout. His casual remarks often made the doctors and attendants laugh despite their anxiety.

A few hours after the serious operation of August 1949, Bhagavan decided to give *darshan* to the many devotees who were waiting anxiously outside the ashram dispensary, even though he had been advised not to go outside for many days. He was as serene as ever and even smiled from time to time. At noon the next day, as soon as the doctors had left, he returned to the hall where he always sat, saying that he should not occupy the dispensary and inconvenience the patients who needed to go there for treatment. The doctors and devotees who saw him, even after the fourth operation, marvelled at his tranquil expression and gracious smile. There was no sign of suffering on his face.

The seventy-first birthday of Bhagavan was celebrated in his presence on January 5th, 1950. Bhagavan sat up for hours, morning and evening, in the midst of his devotees. He went through many hymns newly composed by his devotees and heard them sung. The elephant of the Arunachaleswara Temple came and stood before him for a while. After bowing to Bhagavan, it took leave of him by touching his feet with its trunk. A *rani* [queen] who had come from North India to pay her respects to Bhagavan took a motion picture of the scene. The atmosphere was full of joy, and the festivities ended with the bowing of the devotees to their Master at the end of the vedic chanting.

Prayers and chanting of hymns for Bhagavan's recovery went on for months at the ashram and outside. When Bhagavan was once asked about their efficacy, he remarked with a smile: 'It is certainly desirable to be engaged in good activities. Let them continue.'

When the devotees prayed to Bhagavan to set his health aright by his own potent will, he replied, 'Everything will get all right in due course'. And then he asked them, 'Who is there to will this?'

He could not will or desire anything, having lost the sense of separate individuality in the universal consciousness.

Bhagavan kept to his usual daily routine until it became physically impossible for him to continue it. He took his morning bath an hour before sunrise, sat for *darshan* at fixed hours, morning and evening, went through the correspondence of the ashram and supervised the printing of the ashram publications, often making suggestions. Everything received attention, despite

ill health.

More than a year before his *mahanirvana* Bhagavan had quoted and rendered into Tamil verse a *sloka* from *Srimad Bhagavatam*[4]: 'Let the body, the result of fructifying karma, rest or move about, live or die; the sage who has realised the Self is not aware of it, just as one in a drunken stupor is not aware of his clothing.'

Late in 1949, Bhagavan picked up and expounded on a verse from *Yoga Vasishtam*: 'The *jnani* who has found himself to be formless pure awareness, is unaffected though his body be cleft with a sword. Sugar-candy does not lose its sweetness even when it is broken or crushed.'

On one occasion during the last months, Bhagavan asked an anxious attendant, 'When we have finished a meal, do we keep the leaf-plate on which we have eaten it?'

On another occasion he told the same attendant that the *jnani* rejoices to be relieved of the body by death in the same way that a servant rejoices when he lays down his burden at the place of delivery.

With a look of compassion, Bhagavan, in his last days, consoled a devotee, saying, 'They take this body for Bhagavan and attribute suffering to him. What a pity! They are despondent that Bhagavan is going to leave them and go away. Where can he go and how?'

When one of his attendants entered his room, Bhagavan greeted him with a smile and asked, 'Do you know what *moksha* [liberation] is?'

The attendant looked at the Master in receptive silence, so Bhagavan continued: 'Getting rid of non-existent misery and attaining bliss, which is the only existence: that is the definition of *moksha*!'

Even during his last days, when he was unable to come out of his room, Bhagavan continued to give *darshan* to hundreds of devotees, morning and evening, reclined majestically on his couch, like Bhishma on his bed of arrows. Bhagavan did not agree to the cancellation of *darshan* even on days when his condition was critical. The *darshan* went on right up to the last evening.

As the news of the rapid deterioration of Bhagavan's physical

[4] *Skandha* xi, ch. 13, v. 36.

condition spread, hundreds of devotees came to Tiruvannamalai to have a final *darshan*. In the queue that filed past his room there were men and women, rich and poor, literates and illiterates from all parts of India and abroad. All were united in their devotion to this Divine Personification.

On Wednesday evening, two days before the *mahanirvana*, Bhagavan gave a peculiar look of grace to everyone who passed before him in the queue. It struck some of them that it might be the parting look of Bhagavan, and so it proved to be, for during his last two days Bhagavan had not the physical energy to turn round and look at the devotees. But whether his eyes were open or closed, his mind was always clear and he was able to talk to his attendants whenever it was necessary.

On Thursday morning, when a doctor brought Bhagavan some medicine to relieve congestion in the lungs, Bhagavan told him that it was not necessary and that everything would come right within two days. That night Bhagavan directed his attendants to retire for sleep or meditation and leave him alone.

On Friday morning, Bhagavan said 'thanks' to an attendant who had just then finished massaging his body. The attendant, who did not know English, blinked with surprise. Bhagavan explained to him with a smile the import of the English expression. We all thought that Bhagavan, on the eve of his withdrawal from the physical plane, was probably conveying through him his thanks to all who had served him.

That evening there was a vast gathering of devotees and all of them had *darshan* of Bhagavan. Many stayed on at the ashram after *darshan* because they knew that Bhagavan's condition was critical.

At about sunset Bhagavan asked his attendants to lift him up to a sitting position. They raised him up and put him in a comfortable position with one of them gently supporting his head. One of the doctors began to give him oxygen but Bhagavan made him stop with a wave of his right hand.

There were ten or twelve persons, including doctors and attendants, in the small room. Two of them were fanning Bhagavan while hundreds more waited anxiously outside the door. A group of devotees seated in front of the room began chanting with devotional fervour the hymn of Arunachala composed by Bhagavan that has the chorus 'Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala'. Bhagavan's eyes

opened a little and flashed for a moment. From their outer edges, tears of ecstasy rolled down his cheeks.

The last breaths followed one another, softly, smoothly. Then with no premonition or shock, the breathing stopped. Bhagavan had receded into his Reality, the Heart of the universe. The extraordinary peace of the hour overwhelmed everyone in his presence. The transcendental glory of Bhagavan, the luminous Self, finally prevailed and was felt by all present. Bhagavan's final silence proclaimed: 'Unveiled, here I am, effulgent in my eternal reality.'

The climax of my own spiritual experiences in the proximity of Bhagavan took place during these last moments. As I stood in that small room everything became shadowy, enveloped by an indivisible pure awareness, the one-and-only, ever-present Reality. There was not the least feeling of separation from Bhagavan or the least vestige of sorrow on his physical death. Instead, there was a positive ecstasy and an elation of spirit which was nothing but the natural state of the Self.

A devotee once asked Bhagavan: 'Who are you Arunachala Ramana? Are you God or a *siddha*?' Bhagavan who was living in Virupaksha Cave at the time, replied in verse: 'The Supreme Self, the blissful pure consciousness sporting within the heart of all gods and creatures, is Arunachala Ramana.'

To those blessed devotees who have contacted Bhagavan in the Heart, he is the eternal presence, the unchanging reality, the substratum of all appearance. But even we, the many who have not understood and utilised properly this rare opportunity of Bhagavan's advent in our midst, can still be spiritually benefited by him. The potency of his grace is such that it will, in course of time, effect a spiritual transformation in us, annihilate our ego, the source of all evil, and absorb us back into the Life Eternal. Let us open and surrender ourselves to his grace.

Sri Ramana Maharshi's Life – a brief outline

1879	Born in Tiruchuzhi, a small town in modern-day Tamil Nadu, to Sundaram Iyer and Azhagammal. He was given the name Venkataraman.
1891	Moved with his family to Dindigul, a nearby town.
1892	His father died. Venkataraman then moved to Madurai with his family.
1896	His 'death experience' in his family home culminated in Self-realisation. At the end of August he left home, without telling his family, and moved to Arunachala (Tiruvannamalai), where he spent the rest of his life. He spent the first few weeks of his time there in the Arunachaleswara Temple.
1897	Moved to Gurumurtam, a temple about a mile from town, and lived for a year and a half either in the shrine or in a nearby mango orchard.
1898	His uncle Nelliappa Iyer and his mother visited him and tried to persuade him to return home, but he refused. Moved to Pavalakundru, a shrine on a rocky mound to the north of the main temple.
1899	He began to live on the lower slopes of Arunachala, mostly in Virupaksha Cave, but also occasionally in Guhai Namasivaya Temple, Mango Tree Cave and Sadguruswami Cave.
1907	He was given the name 'Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi' by Ganapati Muni.
1916	Moved to Skandashram.
1922	His mother died in May this year and was buried on the southern side of Arunachala, at the foot of the hill. A few months later Bhagavan left Skandashram and began living near his mother's *samadhi*. This became the site of Sri Ramanasramam. Bhagavan remained there till he passed away in April 1950.

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Glossary

abhishekam	An act of ritual worship in which a deity is washed or bathed with various liquids.
Aksharamanamalai	A 108-verse poem addressed to Arunachala, written by Bhagavan in 1913.
annas	An obsolete unit of Indian currency. In Bhagavan's lifetime the rupee was divided into sixteen *annas*.
Atman	The Self; held by advaitins to be identical with *Brahman*.
Atma vichara	Self-enquiry.
bhajans	Devotional songs addressed to a Hindu deity.
bhakta	A devotee.
bhakti	Devotion.
bhiksha	Food offered to *sadhus* by lay people. It can range from food put in a begging bowl to a feast given to large numbers of people.
brahmachari	A celibate student; a member of the first *asrama* or stage of life.
brahmacharya	Celibacy; the first Hindu stage of life in which one studies with a religious teacher and remains single.
Brahman	The impersonal absolute reality of Hinduism.
choultry	A guest house for Hindu pilgrims.
darshan	To see or be seen by a Hindu deity or Guru.
dharma	Right action; moral duty; divine law; religious tradition.
dhoti	A piece of cloth, worn like a wrap-around skirt by many men in South India.
dhyana	Meditation.
dosa	A pancake made from rice and dhal flour.
giri	Hill or mountain; *giri pradakshina* is circumambulating a mountain.
iddlies	Lens-shaped rice cakes; the staple breakfast fare of most South Indians.

japa — The repetition of God's name or of any other combination of sacred words.

jayanti — In this book, the birthday of Bhagavan and the celebrations that are associated with it.

jnana — True knowledge; realisation of one's true nature.

jnani — One who has a direct awareness of himself as *jnana*; an enlightened person.

kamandalu — A small water container, usually made out of a coconut shell.

kaupina — A loincloth.

kumbhabhishekam — A consecration ceremony in which various liquids are poured from a pot (*kumbha*) onto an image of a deity.

lingam — A vertical column of stone with a rounded upper end. Installed in the inner shrines of all Siva temples, it is regarded by devotees as a physical manifestation of the deity.

maha — Great or big.

maharani — A queen, the wife of a maharaja.

mahasamadhi — The moment when an enlightened being leaves his body.

mahatmas — Great souls or great beings.

mahavakyas — Four upanishadic sayings that affirm the nature of reality and the identity between the individual self and the absolute underlying reality.

Malayalam — The predominant language of Kerala, the state in South-West India that is adjacent to Tamil Nadu

manana — Convincing oneself that the teachings given by the Guru are true. This may be done by reasoning or by study.

mantapam — A Hindu architectural structure that generally consists of a stone roof, supporting stone pillars, but no walls.

marga — Path or way.

math — A Hindu centre or institution, often monastic in nature, and frequently set up to commemorate a great saint of the past.

mauna	Silence; a synonym for the thought-free experience of the Self.
maya	Illusion; the power that makes the unreal world appear real.
muni	A sage.
naivedya	Consecrated food offered to a deity and subsequently distributed as *prasad.*
nama japa	Repetition of the name of God.
namaskar(am)	A gesture of obeisance, often a full-length prostration on the floor, but sometimes merely a standing gesture in which one indicates respect by putting the palms together.
nididhyasana	Meditation or contemplation in which one experiences directly the truth of the teachings given by the Guru.
padmasana	The cross-legged full-lotus position.
Paramatman	The Supreme Self.
parayana	The chanting of scriptural or other sacred works.
patasala	Traditional school.
pooris	Fluffy, deep-fried chapatis.
pradakshina	Circumambulation of a sacred object.
pranava	The sound of Om.
prarabdha	Destiny; the script that one has been allotted for this life; karma carried over from previous lives that has to be experienced in the current one.
prasad	Anything offered to a deity or Guru becomes *prasad* when some or all of it is returned to the donor or distributed publicly. Most commonly it would be food or *vibhuti* and *kumkum.*
puja	Ritualistic worship or adoration of a deity.
pujari	A priest who performs *puja.*
rasam	A highly spiced liquid served at most South Indian meals. Its principal ingredients are pepper and tamarind.
rishis	Seers; spiritual adepts who have seen into the nature of reality.
Rs	An abbreviation of rupee.

rudraksha — Large seeds, resembling a small walnut, held to be sacred by worshippers of Siva. They are generally worn, strung in necklaces.

Sadguru — A fully enlightened Guru who is established in *sat*, the underlying being.

sadhaka — A spiritual seeker.

sadhana — Spiritual practice; a means for getting enlightenment.

sadhus — Full-time spiritual seekers who have renounced worldly responsibilities in order to seek enlightenment.

sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi — The state of complete enlightenment in which one can function normally and naturally in the world. *Sahaja* means natural.

samadhi — A direct but temporary experience of the Self, usually in a trance-like condition with no outer awareness; the tomb of a saint.

sambar — A spicy sauce that accompanies all South Indian meals.

samsara — The continuous cycle of death and rebirth to which the individual soul is subject up till the moment of liberation; the phenomenal world of names and forms, especially as it appears to the unenlightened mind.

sankalpa — Will or intention; the faculty of the mind that chooses or makes decisions.

sannyasa — The fourth *asrama* or stage of life in which one completely renounces the world and all ones relationships and in which one lives as a mendicant monk.

Sannyasi(n) — One who has taken *sannyasa*. See the above entry.

sarvadhikari — 'Ruler of all'; the title by which Chinnaswami, the manager of Ramanasramam was known.

sastras — Scriptures.

Siddhanta — Philosophy; more specifically the philosophy derived from the Saiva scriptures of South India.

siddhas — Perfected beings; it particularly denotes those who have mastered *siddhis*, supernatural powers.

siddhis	Supernatural powers.
sravana	Hearing the truth from a qualified teacher.
Sri	An honorific prefix denoting respect.
stotras	Sacred poetry.
sushumna	A channel in the subtle body through which the *kundalini* energy moves.
swarupa	Real nature; own nature; real form; own form.
tapas	Arduous spiritual practice, often involving bodily mortification. Its aim is to burn off spiritual impurities.
tapasvin	One who performs *tapas*.
Telugu	A language spoken by about sixty million people who live mostly in the modern-day state of Andhra Pradesh.
upadesa	Spiritual teachings, particularly those given to a disciple by a Guru.
vasanas	The tendencies of the mind that make one think and behave in repeated, habitual ways.
Vedanta	The philosophy derived from the *Upanishads*, the concluding portions of the *Vedas*. Vedanta means 'end of the *Vedas*'.
Veda patasala	A school that teaches knowledge of the *Vedas* to brahmin boys.
Vedas	The highest, oldest and most respected scriptures of Hinduism.
vibhuti	Sacred ash; made from burnt cow dung, it is dispensed at the end of *pujas*. The officials at Ramanasramam generally enclose a small packet in all their outgoing letters.
vichara	Self-enquiry.
zamindar	Large landowner; a member of the land-owning classes.

Index

The index is divided into two parts. The first section is an alphabetical listing of topics, mostly proper nouns and technical terms. The second section, arranged in numerical order, gives a brief summary of all the events in which Bhagavan played a role.

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Numerical Listing

Kunju Swami

5 K's first meeting with B.
5 death of Annamalai Swami.
6 K gets *upadesa* from B.
7 B instructs K via *Kaivalyam*.
8 B stays with Ramanatha Brahmachari.
8–9 K experiences the Heart.
9–10 K goes back to Kerala and returns.
10 K becomes B's attendant.
11–13 B instructs K via *Kaivalyam*.
13–4 B clears K's doubts.
14–5 Palaniswami and B.
15 B's *pranava* body.
16 B tries to run away from Virupaksha Cave.
16–17 B taken to Isanya Math by Sattappa Swamigal.
17–8 feeding arrangements for B.
18–9 B learns Malayalam.
19–20 B's Malayalam version of *Upadesa Saram*.
20–1 B acquires knowledge of spiritual books.
21 composition of *Aksharamanamalai*.
22–3 B visits Arunachaleswara Temple during Navaratri.
23–6 attempts to initiate B.
26 B has chilli bath.
27 B meets *bairagis*.
28 B and Navanna Swami.
29 Achyutadasa visits B.
30–1 B goes inside Arunachala.
31–2 B stung by hornets.
32–5 K attempts to find banyan tree.
35–6 B moves to Skandashram.
36–7 Palaniswami's death.
37–8 Skandashram food and finances.
38–41 daily routine at Skandashram.
39–40 B gives *darshan* to elderly devotees.
40–1 B in *samadhi*.
41 *pradakshina* with B.
41–2 passing away of Azhagammal.
43–6 funeral of Azhagammal.
45–6 *puja* at the Mother's *samadhi*.
46 first Ramanasramam well.
47–8 sending food to Ramanasramam.
48 B moves to Ramanasramam.
48–9 daily *bhikshas* at Ramanasramam.

50–2 Ramanasramam routine.
51–2 all-night *pradakshinas* with B.
52–5 K tells story to Sundarambal.
55–6 B speaks of *pradakshina*.
56–7 B stops going on *pradakshina*.
57–8 B discourages K from taking an interest in ashram affairs.
58–9 Ramakrishna Swami goes for *bhiksha*.
59–60 Lakshmi Amma's son recites *Dakshinamurti Stotra* before B.
60 K and Ramakrishna Swami alternate as attendants.
61 Ramakrishna Swami's visions.
61 K goes five days without sleep.
62–3 head of Kovilur Math supports B.
63 K doesn't prostrate to Mahadeva Swami.
64 Alamelu Amma has vision of B as Subramaniam.
64–5 B praises people when they die.
65–6 K works with B in the kitchen.
66–7 Echammal feeds non-brahmin *sannyasins*.
67 B allows *Patasala* teacher to eat separately.
68–9 B cleans discarded spinach roots.
69–71 K wants to learn Vedanta.
71–2 B translates verse from *Yoga Vasishta*.
72–3 B tells story of King Janaka.
73–4 N. Indian pandit silenced in B's presence.
74–6 K tries to prevent B from grinding.
76–8 B sends K to help Ramakrishna Swami's brother.
78 B's biography in Malayalam.
78–81 Veerasubbia Swamigal and B exchange compliments.
81–4 B speaks of *sahaja samadhi*.
83 Sankarananda goes into *laya*.
84–5 K resigns as attendant.
85–6 B advises K on *sadhana*.
86–7 K moves to Palakottu.
88–9 Ramanatha Brahmachari.
90 K makes mistakes to attract B's attention.
91–6 B gives different *sadhanas* to different devotees.
92–3 Dandapani Swami receives *upadesa*.
93–4 B's non-interference in devotees' affairs.
95 B speaks of the importance of grace.

Muruganar

97–9 M comes to Bhagavan.
99–101 M's visionary experiences.
102 B encourages M to imitate Manikkavachagar.
103–7 M, Meenakshi and Bhagavan.
109–11 B's *upadesa* to M.
112 M cleans *lingam* excessively.
113 circumstances of M's enlightenment.
127–8 B praises M's poetry and spiritual status.
131 B edits *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.
146–8 M describes how he came to B.
148–9 M's description of B.

T. P. Ramachandra Iyer

150 R's experiences in B's presence.
150–2 R's grandfather feeds B.
152–4 Chadwick and R try to cure B.
154–7 B's preference for simple food.
154–5 B attempts to eat all his medicines.
155–7 B extols *kanji*.
157–8 B vomits in the dining room and is given oranges.
159–61 Dilip Kumar Roy receives *upadesa*.
160–2 Post Office official gets assurance from B.
162–3 anonymous visitor leaves after three hours.
163–4 B refuses to allow fund-raising for the Mother's Temple.
164 B's attempt to bury his mother without ceremonies.
165–6 Chinnaswami orders palanquin and umbrella.

166–72 B walks to Skandashram to see workman.
169–70 B speaks of begging for his food.

Chhaganlal V. Yogi

175–6 Y's first meeting with B.
176–7 Y sings *Upadesa Saram* before B.
178–83 Y's printing press stories.
179 Y's vision of B in Bombay.
179–80 Y buys press in Bangalore.
180–1 *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*.
182–3 Y resolves dispute with ashram official.
183–4 Y's vision of B in Ramanasramam.
184–5 Y's vision of B in the Arunachaleswara Temple.
186 Nepali devotee's vision of B.
188–90 B tells a story of a saint blessing a thief.
190–1 Y tries to give B a new pen.
192–3 B's frugality at Virupaksha Cave.
193 ladles, raisins and *harade* appear.
195–6 B refuses special diet.
196–7 B gives up his sofa and sits on the floor.
197–8 B's response to aggressive visitors.
198 B's knees need oiling.
199–201 Muslim tamarind contractor is 'cursed'.
201 B puts snuff up Jagadisha Sastri's nose.
202–3 B gives Jagadisha Sastri protection from the sun.
203–6 B refuses to sign his name.
206–7 B sits in silence with a Collector.

Lakshmana Swamy

215 L hears about B for the first time.
216–7 L's first visit to B.
217–8 world becomes dreamlike to L.
219 L repeats B's name and experiences the Self.
220–1 L realises the Self in B's presence.
222 L informs B of his realisation.
223 B sends Venkataratnam to check on L.
223–4 B's positive reaction on seeing L.
225 Ganesh statue tries to garland L.
225 L's reaction to B's *mahasamadhi*.
226 L's final ecstatic experience with B.

Viswanatha Swami

228–9 V's first *darshan* of B.
230 B sings 'Ramana *Sadguru*'.
230 V chants in Sanskrit for B.
230 B speaks of his experience of the Self.
231 V moves to Ramanasramam.
233–4 B advises V on *sadhana*, *brahmacharya* and the Heart.
234–5 V's father impressed by B.
235 V does *pradakshina* with B.
236 B sends V to Ganapati Muni.
237 V serves Ganapati Muni.
237 B scolds V for wastefulness.
237–8 V makes notebook and shows B.
238–40 V, Ganapati Muni and B walk in the forest.
241 Achyutadasa visits B in Gurumurtam.
241–2 Vilacheri Mani Iyer impressed by B.
242 Vilacheri Mani Iyer given *upadesa* by B.
243–4 Narayana Guru's visit to B.
244–9 B's final illness and *mahasamadhi*.
249 V experiences the Self with B.

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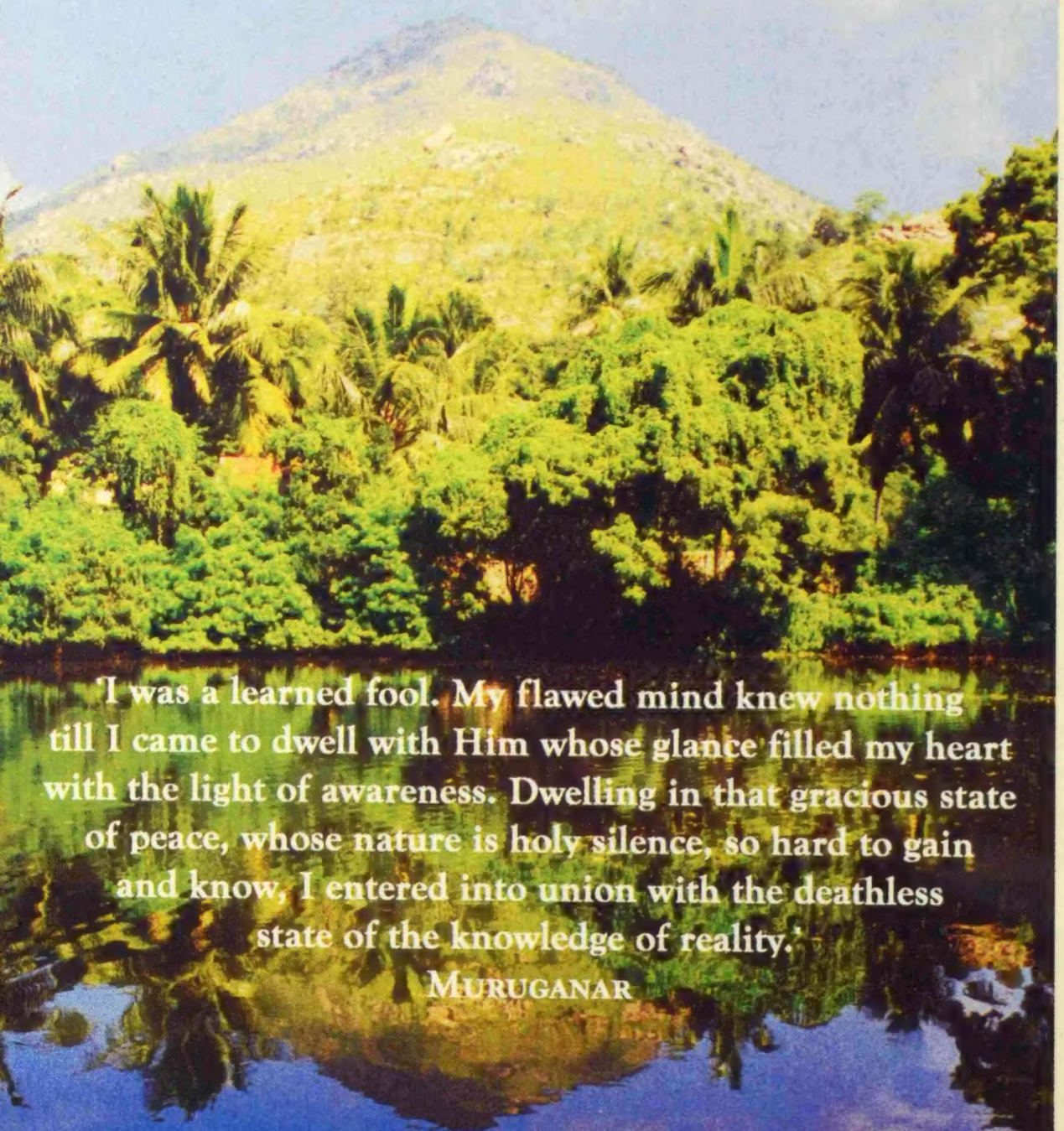

'I was a learned fool. My flawed mind knew nothing till I came to dwell with Him whose glance filled my heart with the light of awareness. Dwelling in that gracious state of peace, whose nature is holy silence, so hard to gain and know, I entered into union with the deathless state of the knowledge of reality.'

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